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- RAILWAY JOURNEYS
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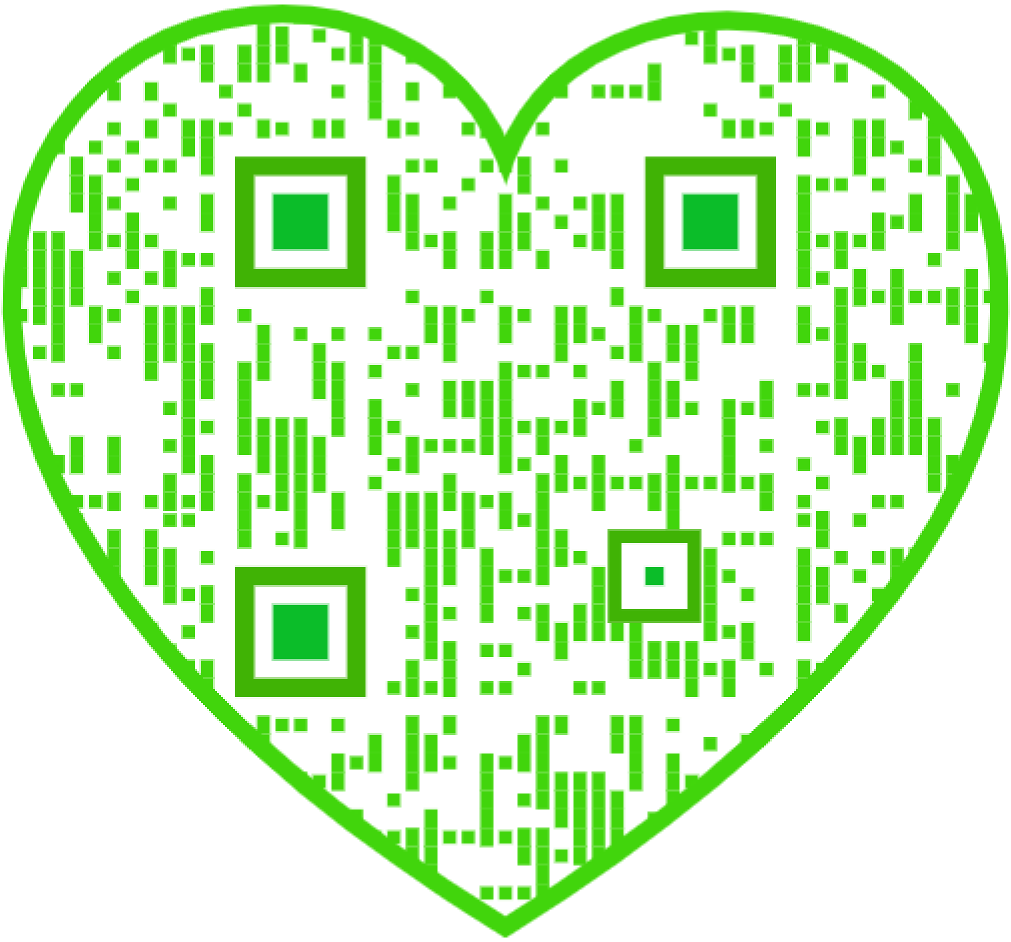
The Salt Path

Raynor Winn on turning her bestseller into a major movie



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Drink in dramatic coastal views from North Devon's u-shaped Valley of Rocks

Walking as therapy

"Reading our interview with Raynor Winn this issue (page 40) really struck a chord with me – and not just because the places she talks about are so familiar to me. The author of the best-selling memoir *The Salt Path* tells us about her emotional journey along the South West Coast Path after she and her husband became homeless, a journey that gave them so much.

As a child growing up in North Devon, the Valley of Rocks was just one of those places we would go sometimes – climb up the rocks, get blown about, charge back down, ask for an ice cream. And for a while, I thought my parents knew everybody – after all, they said hello to everyone we passed, and most people returned the greeting.

It's a custom I love – that time-honoured exchange of the times of the day ("morning", "afternoon", "evening"). Of course, not everybody replies, but then not everybody's having a good day. The countryside isn't just somewhere we go when everything's fine, it's the place we escape to. And, as Raynor attests, it's the place that can give us back our hope. Until we've walked a mile in somebody else's shoes, we have no idea what's going on with them. And it can be hard enough just walking in our own shoes sometimes! Enjoy the issue – I'm off out for a walk.

Paul McGuinness, editor@countryfile.com

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From the towering cliffs of RSPB Bempton on the coast to shallow, crystal-clear streams further inland, Charlotte Smith explores England's most northerly chalk outcrop – in the East Riding of Yorkshire.

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WANLOCKHEAD
SCOTLANDS HIGHEST VILLAGE

Wanlockhead, Scotland
Sammi Kinghorn and Sean Fletcher learn about the natural riches and hidden treasures of Wanlockhead – the highest village in Scotland situated way up in the lofty hills of Dumfries and Galloway.

Camel Trail, Cornwall
Adam Henson and Charlotte Smith reveal the Camel Trail's history, encounter the wildlife that calls this diverse north-Cornwall habitat home and meet the people who live and work along its route.

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OUR COLUMNISTS

John Craven, "The truth about the nightingale's plight", p24
"English nightingales are in steep decline; numbers have dropped by 90% in recent decades."

Adam Henson, "Eat wild venison, do the countryside a favour", p27
"Controlling deer numbers with a measured and humane cull is seen as essential to manage woodland."

Nicola Chester, "Responsible dog ownership is crucial", p98
"Livestock worrying is a serious concern – horrible to witness – as is the effect dogs can have in disturbing wildlife."

*The May 2025 running order wasn't confirmed at the time of going to press

Photos: Getty

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Berkshire Bedlam Morris perform at Guildford Summerpole Festival, a May Day celebration to welcome in the summer that was first recorded in the early 16th century

The merry month of May

Make the most of the vitality of spring with a subscription to *BBC Countryfile Magazine*

Check out this month's special subscription offer, page 28

Photo: Gillian Pullinger/Alamy

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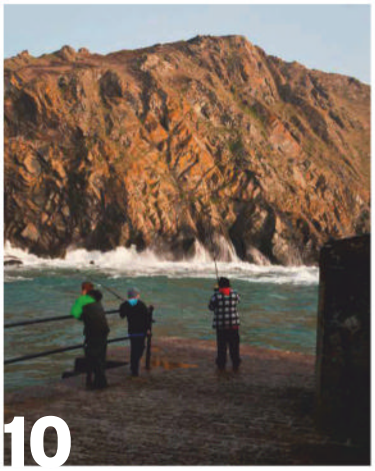
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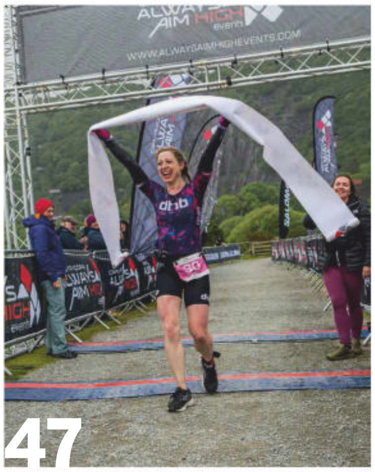

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ON THE COVER

Walk the South West Coast Path for this incredible view from Hoist Point, South Devon.

May

NATURE | TRAVEL | NEWS | VIEWS

Close-up Photographer of the Year winners revealed

The sixth CUPOTY awards saw some 11,000 pictures land on the judges' desks, each vying to be a winner in the 10 nature and landscape categories. A finalist in the 'Young' (under 18s) category was 'Can I Help You?', eight-year-old Jamie Smart's mouse in the English countryside. "Harvest mice are just so cute. I love the way this little mouse looks like it's peeping through wheat curtains with a curious look on its face," says Jamie. See the winners at **cupoty.com**.

Photo: Jamie Smart/CUPOTY

Wild fishing on remote beaches

If you're looking to cast yourself away for a few hours along Britain's scenic fringes, **Kevin Adams**, author of a new guide to wild angling, suggests seven shores for an exciting catch

1 MULLION COVE, CORNWALL

Picturesquely sited between cliffs bountiful in wildlife, the cove's calm waters are sometimes battered by powerful Atlantic storms. Mullion once had a thriving pilchard-fishing community and was well known for its lobster, crab and crawfish. All you need to fish is a light lure rod and a 10lb line. You can catch mackerel and pollock around the wall and, occasionally, a bass. The Mullion Cove car park is a five-minute walk up Nannsmelleyon Road.

2 DRURIDGE BAY, NORTHUMBERLAND

During the Second World War, Druridge Bay was thought a likely landing place for German invaders. The pillbox built here to defend the coast was disguised as a cottage, a feat of cunning that has won it Grade II-listed status. Coalfish are a common catch here and take a variety of baits fished on the bottom, as well as being caught on spinners and lures. Parking is a few minutes' walk from the beach.

3 MOGGS EYE BEACH, LINCOLNSHIRE

Also known as Huttoft Beach, Moggs Eye is a lovely rural spot with a large car park and, when the tide is in, a steeply shelving beach. If you like to angle in solitude this is one of the increasingly rare beach-fishing sites in England where that's possible. Expect to do well with whiting and some dogfish. Beware that paying for the car park can be tricky via the app since the Wi-Fi signal is unreliable.

4 CARRADALE BEACH, ARGYLL & BUTE

A mile-long stretch of white sand, the beach at Carradale is usually as quiet as it is picturesque. Set beside a small fishing village, with wonderful views over the Sound of Arran, it's an excellent spot for most disciplines of angling. You can fish with a fly and expect to catch sea trout in season on the Carradale Water that flows in to the bay. Others go after the pollock that are relatively abundant here.

Photos: Paul Farmer, Doug Belshaw, Alamy, John Halsam, Dmitry Djouce, Sara Florence, Eric Jones

3

4

5 LOCH OF STENNESS, ORKNEY

This large sea loch is best fished from the shore since fish can usually be found in the shallower water; sometimes so shallow it's barely enough to cover their backs. Fish are there as it provides a safe haven from hungry seals, so all you need is a floating line. The locals usually fish when the loch is at its lowest, so follow their lead. Fishing here is free but do follow the guidelines on **orkneytroutfishing.co.uk**.

6 TRAETH MAWR, ANGLESEY

Created in the late 18th century to reclaim land from the tidal estuary of Afon Glaslyn, Traeth Mawr is mainly sandy. A sandy bottom means far fewer obstacles on the sea bed to snare your fishing equipment, too. Also known as Aberffraw Bay (pronounced "aber-frow"), you'll find dogfish, bass and flounder here and perhaps some whiting and dabs. Park in the village of Aberffraw and walk in across the dunes.

7 TRAETH PENNLLECH, GWYNEDD

A sandy beach, framed at either end by rock pools, Traeth Pennllech is set at the very northern tip of the beautiful Llŷn Peninsula. Behind it rise sloping, grass-covered cliffs but you'll be angling on sand with a view of jutting rocks – ideal places for fish to hide. Fish include pollack, dabs, dogfish, rockling, rays and whiting; time your visit for dawn or dusk if you want to catch bass. Just around the beach's western edge is a cove, Porth Colmon, with parking.

5

6

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WILD
fishing

Wild Fishing by Kevin Adams is out now (wildthingspublishing.com, £18.99).

WILD BEAVERS LEGALLY RELEASED IN ENGLISH RIVERS

The Eurasian beaver is returning to English waterways after centuries of absence following a Government decision to allow wild releases under licence

Beavers have been successfully reintroduced in at least 25 European countries

Photo: Alamy

Two pairs of beavers have been released into the wild in Purbeck, Dorset – the first to be released under government licence following decades of campaigning by wildlife and conservation groups.

Natural England will grant more licences to release beavers over the next year, allowing the semi-aquatic rodents to live wild in our landscapes centuries after they became extinct in Britain.

Known as a keystone species because the habitats they create benefit many other species, beavers were once abundant in England but became extinct in the 16th century due to overhunting. Over the past 20 years, they have been returning to English waterways through a system of releases into enclosures and a limited trial of wild releases in Devon. The Woodland Trust estimates there are more than 400 beavers in England. Scotland's government approved the first release of beavers in 2009 and it has several thriving populations.

In a statement, Government ministers set out the detail of the new licence system, support for landowners and farmers, and a commitment to produce a plan in consultation with these groups for long-term management of beavers in England.

Tony Juniper, chair of Natural England, says "Beavers have been missing from our landscapes for about 400 years and this careful approach for their planned return is a significant landmark for nature recovery in England. Beavers are environmental engineers. The dams, ponds and canals they build not only create amazingly rich habitats for many other species, but can also help reduce flood risk, purify water and catch carbon."

While some farmers and landowners have voiced concerns about potential damage to farmland, field flooding and riverbanks, ministers say the return of beavers will be carefully managed to avoid impacts on farming, food production and infrastructure. New wild-release projects will be required to develop a 10-year plan to support the introduction of beavers into a landscape before Natural England will consider granting a licence. **Charlie Lyon**

UK'S BIGGEST WILDLIFE ROAD BRIDGE SET FOR GLOUCESTERSHIRE

The green bridge has been designed to be a 'commuting corridor' for wildlife as part of plans to boost nature along the UK's major roads

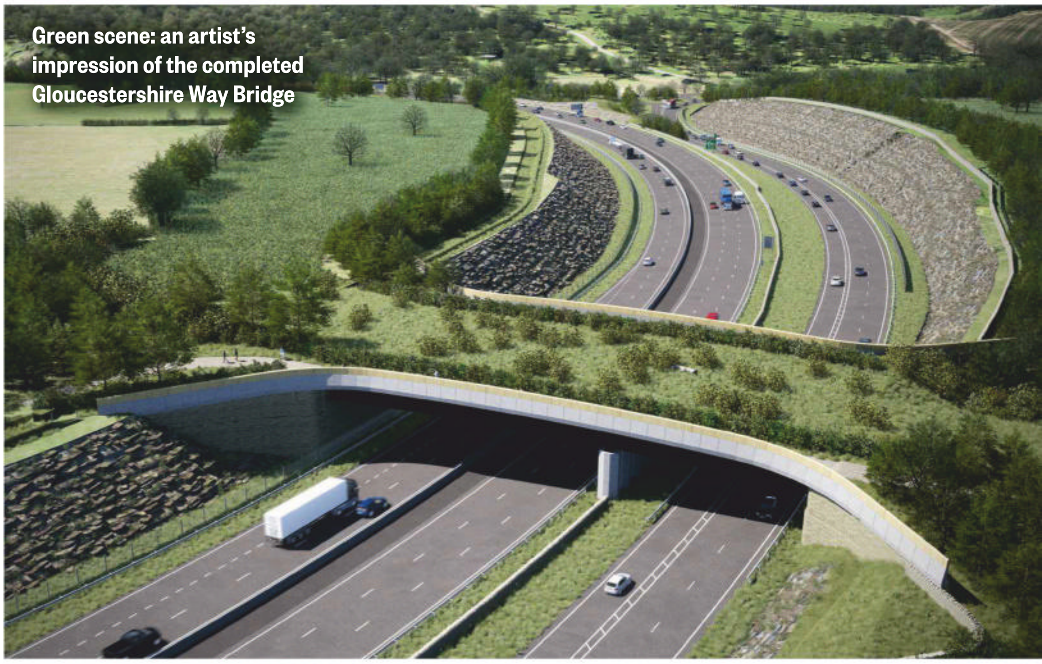
Walkers on the Cotswold Way National Trail will soon share a new green bridge across the A417 with commuting bats, birds, bugs and deer. Due to be completed by 2027, the Gloucestershire Way corridor will be the UK's largest wildlife bridge so far.

The bridge is part of the £460 million A417 Missing Link project – a partnership between Natural England and National Highways – that aims to deliver four miles of safer road while protecting the natural beauty and wildlife of the Cotswolds National Landscape. The bridge will feature a 27-metre-wide strip of grassland and trees to enable species such as deer and reptiles to cross, with a path for walkers, cyclists and horse riders. Hedgerows of native species on either edge of the bridge will help bats and other animals such as barn owls use it as a commuting corridor.

In advance of construction, ecologists are already translocating more than 2,000 reptiles and 100 Roman snails to protect them during works, while high fencing will alter the flight paths of birds to limit collisions with cars. To support local bats, including the lesser horseshoe and barbastelle, a dedicated underpass will be built, while boxes, dead hedging and a converted Second World War bunker will provide them with roosting sites.

Emma Johnson, West Midlands deputy director at Natural England, says the joint project will improve the connection between the Cotswolds' nature-rich spaces. "The road scheme will benefit Crickley Hill and Barrow Wake SSSI, as well as 72.5 hectares of new calcareous grassland as part of biodiversity net gain."

National Highways will also build several similar green bridges across the HS2 railway between London and the West Midlands. **Sophie Ellis**



Green scene: an artist's impression of the completed Gloucestershire Way Bridge

Nest boxes are an effective way to support breeding barn owls

Photos: National Highways, Alamy

BIRD SONG HAS LOCAL 'DIALECTS', STUDY SHOWS

An analysis of more than 100,000 bird songs shows diversity enriches an avian community's 'music scene'

Male great tits are much more vocal than females

Birds' travels and memories influence the range of songs in a community, shows a new three-year-long study. University of Oxford researchers found new immigrants to a bird community tend to adapt to sing local tunes but also enrich song diversity.

The team spent three years collecting over 20,000 hours of sound recordings from a wild population of great tits in Wytham Woods, Oxfordshire, which has been studied for the past 77 years as part of the Wytham Great Tit Study.

The goal of the study, published n the journal *Current Biology,* was to investigate how the movement, age and turnover of birds within a population influences the diversity and evolution of their songs, including which songs become locally popular, which songs fade away and how varied their song repertoires become.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) was used to identify individual birds based on their solo songs and to measure song differences between individuals, in order to track how the local 'music scene' or collective bird song in a wild population changes over time. Just as human communities develop distinct dialects and musical traditions, the study revealed that some birds also evolve local song cultures.

"We wanted to see if the same processes that shape bird populations in a traditional evolutionary sense also influence their songs, since great tits learn their songs, rather than inheriting them genetically," says lead researcher Dr Nilo Merino Recalde from the University of Oxford. "Our study provides real-world evidence that demographic factors, such as age, movement patterns and population turnover, play a key role in shaping the songs we hear in bird populations."

The study found that when birds mix more, through increased local dispersal and the arrival of immigrants, they tend to adopt more common songs but learn more songs overall, enriching the 'music scene'. Areas where birds stay close to their birthplace maintain more unique 'homegrown' song cultures, similar to how isolated human communities often develop distinct dialects or musical styles.

The researchers also found that birds of similar age tend to have more similar repertoires, with mixed-age neighbourhoods having a higher 'cultural diversity'. Older birds can function as 'cultural repositories' of older song types that younger birds may not know. **Graeme Green**

Photos: © Nilo Merino Recalde, © David López Idiáquez

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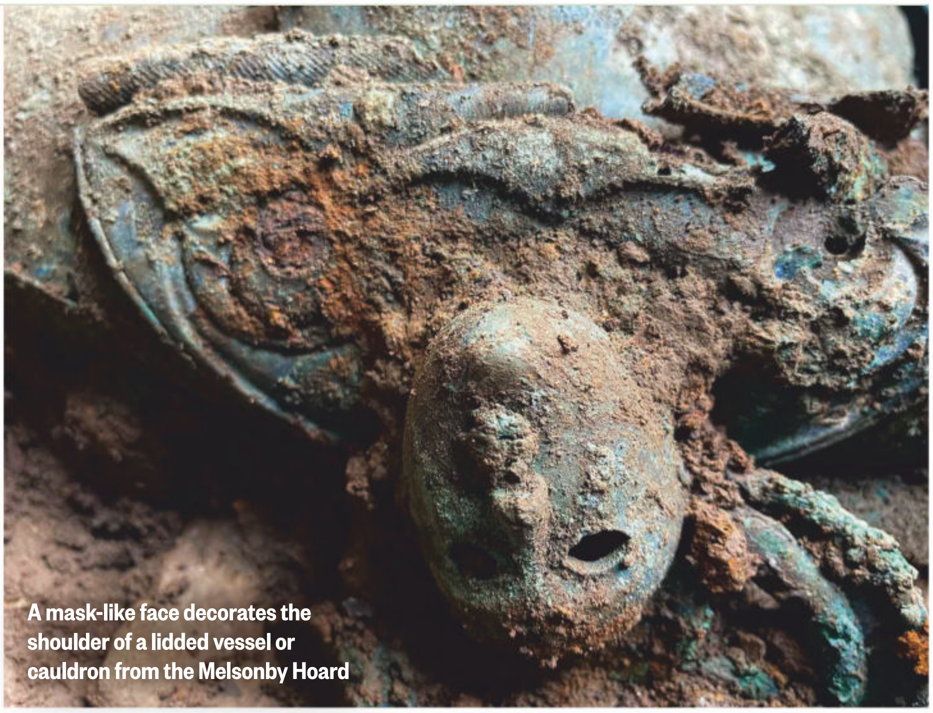

A mask-like face decorates the shoulder of a lidded vessel or cauldron from the Melsonby Hoard

COLOSSAL IRON AGE HOARD FOUND BY DETECTORIST

Chariots, cauldrons and ceremonial spears – over 800 items unearthed in Yorkshire alter our perceptions of ancient Britain

It's a good rule of thumb that if historians declare your archaeological find is not just impressive but has altered the way they view the past, you've stumbled on something important. And that's just what happened to metal detectorist Peter Heads.

Heads' 2021 discovery in a field near Melsonby in North Yorkshire led to the excavation of over 800 Iron Age artefacts. As well as making it one of the biggest hoards from the era ever unearthed in the UK, it has also changed perceptions of the wealth, power and international reach of Britain's elite class some 2,000 years ago.

The make-up of items in the hoard is highly unusual. The dig revealed components from at least seven wagons and/or chariots, including 28 iron tyres, along with elaborate pony harnesses and ceremonial spears. The quantity and variety of these objects have caused academics to reassess their understanding of vehicle use at the time.

Intriguingly, many of the objects were found to have been either burnt or broken. Experts suggest this was a deliberate act by their owners: showing to others that they were so wealthy and powerful they could destroy their own possessions. This revelation could well lead to a major re-think by historians about how wealth and status were expressed.

Heads had permission from the landowner and immediately reported his find; the site was then fully excavated by archaeologists from Durham University with specialist support from the British Museum and funding from Historic England. The treasure trove has been valued at £254,000 and the Yorkshire Museum in York is launching a fundraising campaign to secure it for the nation. In the meantime, anyone who fancies having a first look should head to Yorkshire Museum where a selection of objects will be on display. **Dixe Wills**

Photos: Durham University, Peter Flude

The Plodcast

Tune your ears into our podcast this May*

6 May
We meet leading conservation campaigner and the Chair of Natural England Tony Juniper to hear about his extraordinary new book for saving the planet, *Just Earth*.

13 May
Enjoy a walk and talk in Cambridge with author Robert Macfarlane (below), learning whether rivers are alive and deserve more rights in law.

20 May
Explore the magnificent woodland, orchards and gardens of The Newt, a beautiful country house in Somerset.

27 May
Celebrate episode 300 of the Plodcast when the team returns to the scene of episode 1: Watership Down in Hampshire.

*Episode content may change.

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countryfile.com/podcast

Since its revival in 1988, Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Festival has attracted large crowds on Calton Hill

BELTANE

A flamboyant Celtic festival of fire and fertility, Beltane is a traditional celebration of spring's bounty and the lengthening of the days, writes **Pat Kinsella**

In early May, with crops flourishing in fields and animals getting fat in lush pastures, rural communities across Europe welcome the first flicker of summer.

Around Britain, maypole dancing is seen at village fairs and church fêtes, often held on Whitsun (the seventh Sunday after Easter), but in traditional Celtic culture, the coming season was heralded with a huge fire festival. Sometimes described as Gaelic May Day, Beltane is a celebration of rising warmth and fertility, with people paying thanks to the sun. Roughly translating as 'bright fire', Beltane is the anglicised version of a name that combines a Celtic sun deity Bel (also called Belenus, Belenos, Belinus, Beli Mawr) and the Gaelic word for fire: teine.

Celebrated for millennia, especially in Scotland, the Isle of Man and Ireland (though there are parallels with a similar festival called Cyntefin, traditionally celebrated in Wales on May Day, 'Calan Mai' or 'Calan Haf', first day of summer), the festival falls halfway between the spring equinox and summer solstice. Since medieval times it's been pinned to 1 May.

On this date, or the evening prior, processions traditionally took place, typically led by people playing the role of Bel (the May Queen) and the Green Man. Special foods were baked, decorations were made from yellow wildflowers and fires extinguished in home hearths, before a big blaze was lit and dedicated to Bel, as people implored her to provide a bountiful harvest.

The May Queen and the Green Man lead the Beltane Fire Festival parade on the eve of May Day

Villagers danced around and leapt over flames, seeking purification and fertility, and cattle were walked through smoke to ward off disease. These traditions largely disappeared during the Victorian era, but in the 1980s Beltane was revived, most notably in Edinburgh, where a popular festival takes place.

ANCIENT CELTIC ORIGINS

Celebrated by pagan and Celtic cultures across the British Isles, Beltane was an important fertility festival. Villages gave thanks to the sun and appealed to the deities who controlled the elements to provide them with a bountiful harvest season and success with their herd animals.

Beltane is one of the four major Gaelic seasonal festivals that form the cornerstones of the traditional Celtic calendar – together with Imbolc (celebrated in early February, heralding the beginning of spring), Lughnasadh (early August, when the first harvests happen) and Samhain (at the end of October/beginning of November, the start of the darker part of the year, and the original Halloween). Of these events, Samhain and Beltane were the most significant; both are fire festivals, strongly imbued with symbolic interaction between the human and the mythical world.

Beltane is an anglicised version of the name, however, and the Celtic areas where it was celebrated each had their own spelling: in Scottish Gaelic it is 'Latha Bealltainn', across Ireland it's 'Bealtaine' and on the Isle of Man it's 'Laa Boaltinn'. The earliest mention of Beltane is in Old Irish literature, including in *Sanas Cormaic* written by Cormac mac Cuilennáin around 900AD, but Beltane is thought to have been celebrated since pre-Christian times and it certainly predates the Julian and Gregorian calendars.

> **"HOME HEARTHS WERE RELIT FROM THE BELTANE BLAZE"**

FIRE, FLOWERS AND FEASTING

Beltane bannocks (oatcakes) were traditionally baked the night before and eaten on the day. In Ireland, offerings were made to supernatural beings, the 'aos sí', and people would decorate their dwellings with yellow wildflowers, signifying flames.

Fire is a constant theme in Beltane festivals, with people dancing around and jumping through flames, imploring deities to bless them with purity, fertility and good fortune for their farming endeavours. Having been put out before the festival, home hearths were relit from the Beltane blaze. However, despite the theatrics at Butser Ancient Farm (and other neopagan ceremonies), and films about the subject, there's no real evidence to suggest wicker man effigies were ever burned during Beltane celebrations, let alone with sacrificial human victims inside them. While there are reports of druids conducting such sacrifices, they are questionable, coming from Roman leaders seeking to portray the Celtic priests as bloodthirsty savages.

Photos: Alamy

WHERE TO CELEBRATE BELTANE

EDINBURGH FIRE FESTIVAL

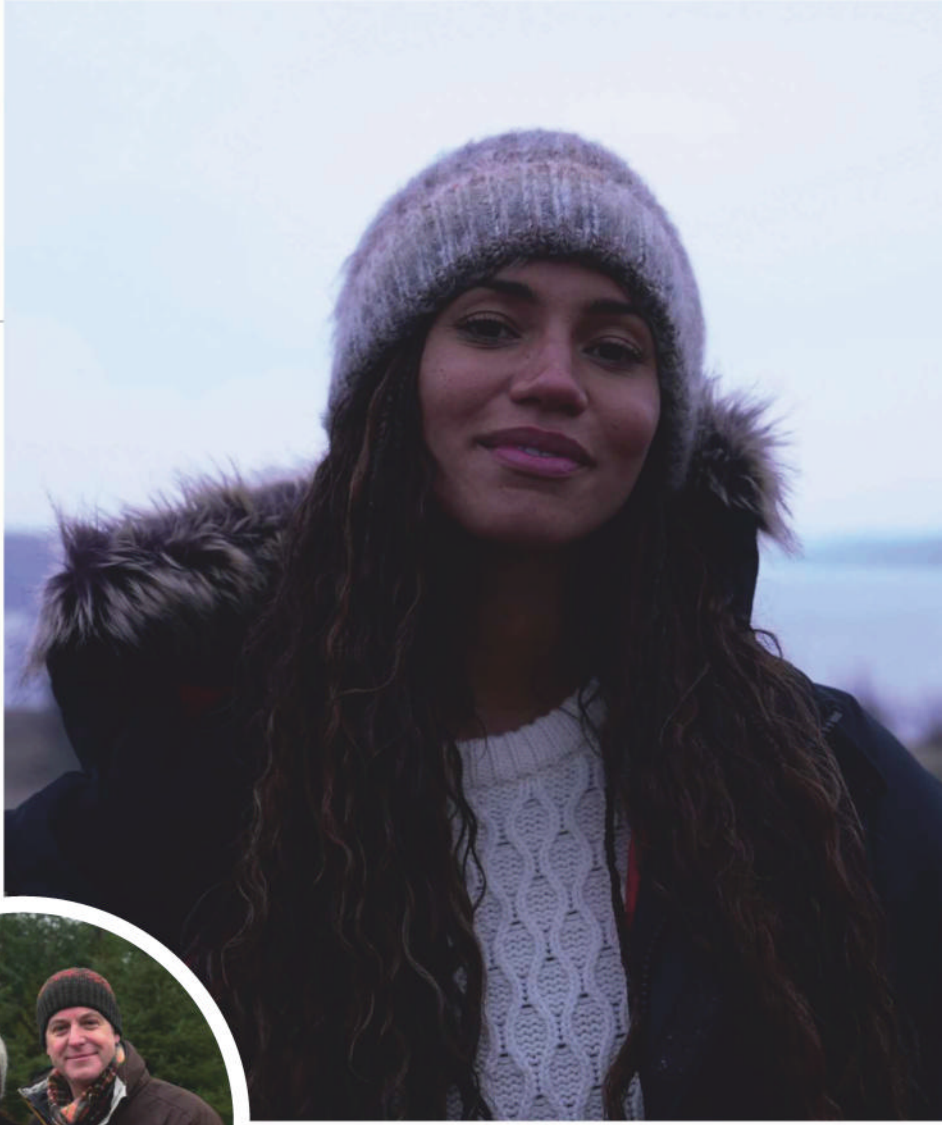
Since being reinvigorated in 1988 by a collective including musicians and academics from the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh, a Beltane Fire Festival has flourished again in the Scottish capital, with traditional celebrations mixed with some modern twists. After being staged at Arthur's Seat for several years, the rapidly growing event moved to Calton Hill, with a procession starting at the National Monument ('the Acropolis' to Beltaners), led by characters invoking the May Queen and the Green Man, and accompanied by drummers. Initially it was a free-to-attend festival but it's now ticketed, with up to 12,000 people turning up annually. **beltane.org**

FOLK FUN IN HAMPSHIRE

Beltane festivals are also annually recreated at Butser Ancient Farm in Waterlooville, Hampshire, where the spectacle includes the burning of a huge wickerman (without any sacrificial victims inside, thankfully). This year's ticketed event takes place on 3 May from 4pm, with live music, re-enactor battles and local crafts. **butserancientfarm.co.uk**

HIGH SPIRITS IN GLASTONBURY

On 1 May in Glastonbury expect to see Morris dancers, stilt walkers, dragons, singing, dancing around the maypole and a big parade up the High Street for the annual Beltane celebration. **glastonburyinformationcentre.co.uk**



FOR THE LOVE OF NATURE

Radio and TV presenter, journalist and author **Vick Hope** is the latest face to join the *Countryfile* team

What are you most looking forward to in your new role on *Countryfile*?

As well as the opportunity to spend more time outdoors in nature – where, quite simply I feel happiest and most peaceful – I'm excited about the amazing mix of passionate people I'm going to meet across the UK who live and breathe country life, and the chance to learn even more about the world around us from such diverse perspectives. There are so many stories to be told, and so much to discover!

Was the natural world a big part of your life as a child?

I was born in Newcastle and moved to the Northumberland countryside when I was about 10 as my parents wanted a bit more space for my brothers and I to run around. I feel so lucky to have spent my childhood exploring forests, climbing trees, swimming in lakes and collecting eggs from our chickens. Between rugged, beautiful Northumberland and summer holidays spent camping on the Isles of Skye and Arran, I remember from a young age feeling incredibly appreciative of the natural world: the fresh air, the fact we could grow fruit and veg, and the freedom!

Have you thought about trying farming?

My husband has had a keen interest in farming for some time, particularly in Ibiza, Spain, where he'd been involved in Terra Masia, the largest organic farm on the island, when we met. We're always researching methods of getting the best out of the land while looking after it, as well as taking a keen interest in self-sufficient living, nutrition and the distribution of healthy, organic produce, so farming here in the UK is certainly on the cards one day.

You've also been a Crufts presenter; what role have dogs played in your life?

My mum is Nigerian and so the idea of having a dog inside the house was culturally quite an odd one to her when we were growing up. I used to love playing with friends' dogs though (particularly Sally and Max the gorgeous labs who I'd count amongst my childhood friends), and adored my stint on Crufts; being around so many good boys and girls was just absolute heaven. We're hoping that when we have a little more outdoor space we can give a golden retriever a lovely home with us.

Where is your favourite country walk?

There's a beautiful walk through the forest and towards the Derwent Reservoir that we like to do as a family most Christmases and Easters. If you're lucky you'll catch a glimpse of a red squirrel, but above all, to me it purely means precious time spent together.

ABOVE Vick Hope is a familiar voice on BBC Radio 1, and has presented a range of TV shows including *Countdown* and *The One Show* **INSET** Vick joined Matt Baker for her *Countryfile* debut in March, filmed in her old stomping ground, Kielder Forest

BBC ONE

Watch Vick and the presenting team on *Countryfile*, Sunday evenings on BBC One.

Photos: BBC

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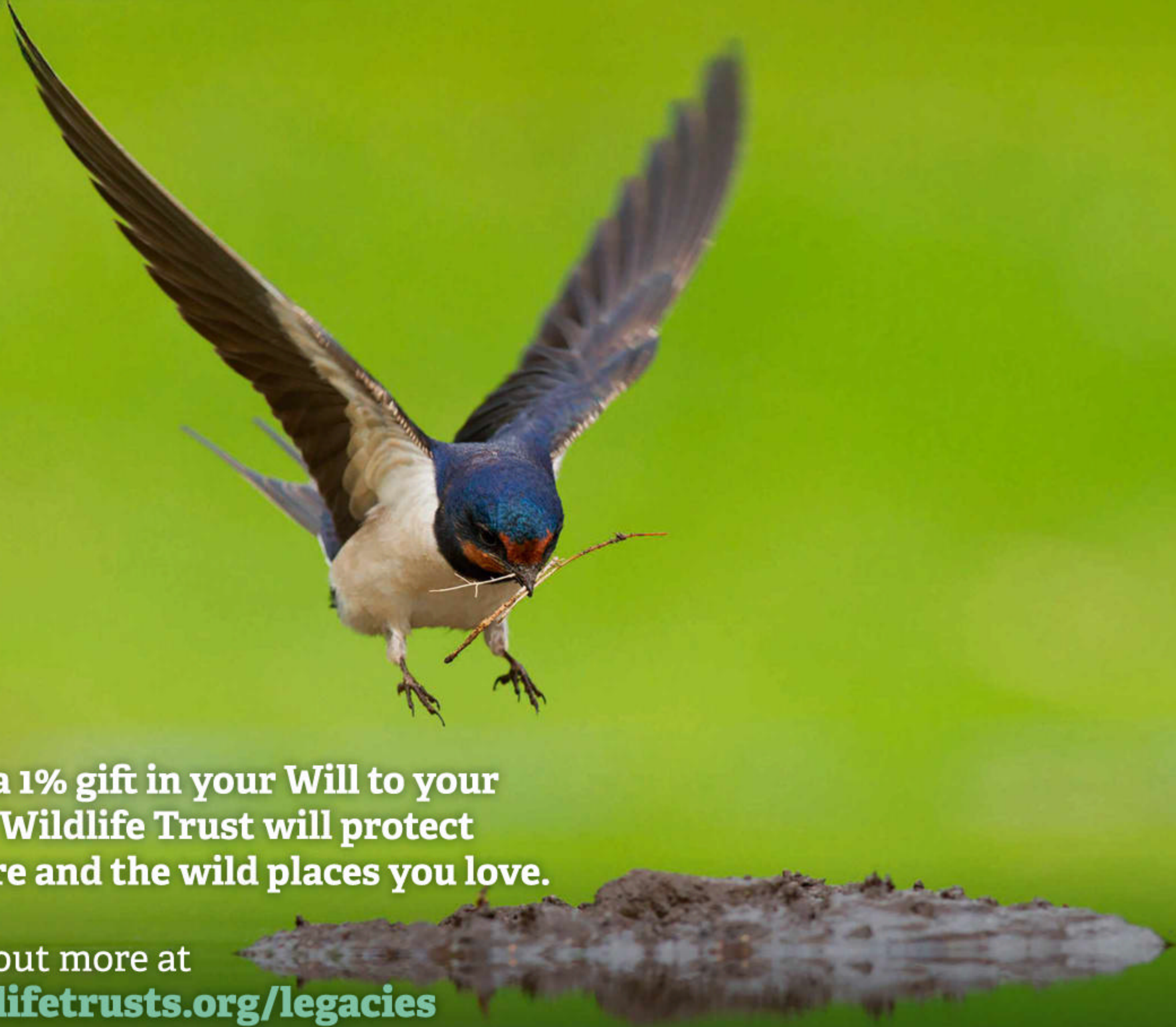
The Wildlife Trusts



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Honey and herb-infused vinegar

As just a teaspoonful of honey represents the lifetime's work of a dozen bees, fermentation expert Rachel de Thample has a recipe that makes the most of this 'liquid gold'

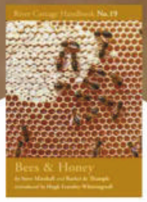
Honeybees are pure alchemists, gathering sunlight in the form of golden sweet nectar, pollen dusted on the stamens of flowering plants and dewy sap from trees to create some of the most nourishing food and medicine that exist in the world with an eternal shelf life.

To respect each drop of honey, I've opted for the 'less is more' philosophy to my recipes. There's another reason for considered consumption. While honey may contain a host of nutritional benefits, including oligosaccharides (a prebiotic that feeds gut flora), enzymes, amino acids, vitamins and minerals, and have antiseptic and antibacterial properties, our bodies break down honey in a very similar way to sugar. While a little sweetness is no bad thing, indulging moderately is the wisest way forward.

When I'm faced with a 'just-about-empty' jar of honey, I make a honey-kissed herb-infused vinegar, choosing one of the herb options opposite. They're stunning and make a brilliant tonic – knock back a tablespoonful in a glass of warm water before bed and it could sooth indigestion and help you sleep better. Honeyed herb vinegars are also a brilliant base for salad dressings. You can use them in cocktails, such as a bloody Mary or whisky sour, too.

Rachel de Thample is a cook, forager, preserver, teacher and author who has worked in food and sustainability for over 20 years.

Photos: Ali Allen, Alamy



An extract from *The River Cottage Bees & Honey Handbook* by Steve Minshall and Rachel de Thample (Bloomsbury, £18.99)

A vinegar infused with thyme may help ease the symptoms of a cold

How to make it

MAKES 250ML

A few sprigs of your favourite herb (see below for health benefits)

1 tbsp honey or an almost empty jar of honey

About 225ml apple cider vinegar

YOU WILL ALSO NEED:

A sterilised 250g lidded jam jar or bottle

---

1. Place the herbs in your jar or bottle with the honey and pour on the cider vinegar, adding more or less, as needed. Shake well to help dissolve the honey and muddle the herb's aromatics with the vinegar.

2. The vinegar can be used straight away and be stored for up to a year in a dark cupboard at room temperature.

Herb options and their health benefits

Bay Can help calm indigestion and treat migraines.

Rosemary Immune-boosting and a cognitive stimulant, so it's good for mental focus and memory.

Lemon verbena Rich in melatonin, which can help you sleep better.

Mint A soothing herb for headaches and upset tummies.

Thyme Great for easing sore throats and coughs.

Sage May help to reduce 'bad' cholesterol.

Summer savory Considered an aphrodisiac by the Ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, it is also great for digestion and sore throats.

Basil It's said to help protect skin from the effects of ageing.

Oregano Contains antioxidants that can help protect cells from free-radical damage.

Lovage Reportedly good for easing stomach pains.

Tarragon May help to improve sleep.

COLUMN *John Craven*

Science reveals the truth about the English nightingale's plight

Nightingales, those glorious heralds of summer, really don't have much to sing about. Far fewer females are around to be seduced by the males' melodious notes, the scrubland they breed in is being munched away and they spend their tropical winters in the wrong place.

New research shows that English nightingales (there aren't any in the rest of the UK) wing their way 3,000 miles to a specific region in and around The Gambia, Africa's smallest country. By confining themselves to such a highly localised area, they stand less chance of survival when conditions turn bad. Using tiny data-gathering backpacks, scientists from the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) have discovered English nightingales don't mix with their European cousins who scatter widely across the rest of West Africa, lowering their risk of succumbing to droughts, climate change and habitat loss.

Nightingales from Spain, France and Portugal can be counted in their millions but ours are in steep decline: numbers have dropped by 90% in recent decades to around 10,000 – and they are the only nightingales wintering in The Gambia. The country comprises stretches of land and coastline either side of its eponymous river and for three months every year these small, shy birds with sublime voices turn the area into the world's most concentrated destination of any migratory bird.

I went to The Gambia one winter to make a film about local wildlife and saw how the needs of a growing human population – for firewood and food, as well as the demands of tourist development – are gnawing away at the natural ecosystems.

"Nightingales are stuck in a small area that's probably not ideal," Dr Chris Hewson, senior research ecologist at BTO, told me. "The Gambia has had two severe droughts and overgrazing by goats is having a big impact on the scrubby habitat the birds rely on. We think the situation there has got much worse since the 1960s and it's over that period that our nightingale population has declined so severely. But if our birds were to move to a more suitable area of West Africa, they would find that nightingales from Europe had probably nabbed the best habitat."

"THE UK NIGHTINGALE POPULATION IS THE ONLY ONE IN EUROPE SHOWING A DECLINE"

So, it seems they are stuck with The Gambia and it's not just the perilous, 6,000-mile round trip to the wrong place that adds to a nightingale's woes. Here at home, their territory has shrunk and now these elusive birds can be heard, if not seen, mainly in Kent, Sussex and Essex.

Very early on a May morning I did see one, thanks to a songbird expert who took me to stretch of undergrowth where he knew there was a nest. We followed its distinctive melodies as, in the words of the poet Keats, it "singest of summer in full-throated ease". Suddenly my friend pointed to the lowest branch of a young tree and there, singing its heart out, was a plain brown bird about the size of a robin, its visual appeal no match for its vocal talents. It was a wildlife moment to cherish, yet this inspiring creature has been on the UK's Red List of birds in danger since 2015.

"Climate change predictions have suggested nightingales should get more common in the UK," says Dr Hewson. "By the beginning of the next decade they should be in Yorkshire. But we are seeing the opposite – they are contracting southwards and the UK population is the only one in Europe showing a decline. Conditions have deteriorated here, but not as badly as they have in their part of Africa. Scrubland has been tidied up and muntjac deer graze on the vegetation where nightingales live and raise their young – so the birds are robbed of habitat and safety from predators. But there are still many areas in England suitable for nightingales; the simple truth is there aren't enough birds to populate them."

Scientists are hoping to use a new system of radio-receiving towers to track how many birds make it back to the UK and where on the migratory cycle mortalities occur. Yet prospects look bleak for the English nightingale. What a tragedy it would be if its song, first written about in Anglo-Saxon times, was forever silenced.

Watch John Craven and the team on *Countryfile*, Sunday evenings on BBC One.

Photo: naturepl.com

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COLUMN *Adam Henson*

A VIEW FROM THE FARM

Eat more wild venison and do the countryside a favour

Are you partial to a decent pint and enjoy the atmosphere of a great British pub? Then chances are you've quenched your thirst in The White Hart.

There are hundreds of White Hart inns all over the country and it's the nation's fourth most popular pub name (after The Red Lion, The Crown and The Royal Oak). But while you sup away, I wonder if you've given any thought to why so many hostelries are called The White Hart?

It's thanks to Richard II, whose personal emblem was a white hart (a male deer or stag); in 1393 when he made it compulsory for pubs to have pictorial signs, many landlords thought they had better keep the king onside by adopting The White Hart name.

In the 14th century, the British Isles were deeply wooded and deer were everywhere. But it might surprise you to learn that it's thought there are more deer in the UK today – with numbers estimated at around two million – than at any point in the last 1,000 years. Large wild deer have no predators and their overpopulation is bad for biodiversity and potentially disastrous for the campaign to plant more trees; seedlings and saplings are a magnet for deer. They devour shoots and foliage, strip the bark and rub their antlers against young tree stems. So controlling deer numbers with a measured and humane cull is seen as essential to manage woodland and vital for nature.

Fallow deer were introduced over 1,000 years ago and are now the most common deer in England

Photo: Alamy

> **"A LOT OF WORK IS UNDERWAY TO GET MORE VENISON ON THE NATION'S PLATES"**

Not everyone agrees and wildlife groups with concerns are being reassured that culling is properly managed and monitored. The Forestry Commission is advising farmers and landowners on ways to manage their woodland sustainably and that includes discussions about a reliable and ethical outlet for deer meat as a by-product. And they're not alone.

NO MORE MISCONCEPTIONS

A lot of work is underway to create a viable market and get more venison on the nation's dinner plates. I've always felt that it's a foodstuff that comes with a lot of misconceptions; "It's only eaten by the gentry", "too gamey and fatty" and even "only available in the winter".

The truth is that venison is a tasty, low-fat source of protein that is available all year round. It's rich in omega-3 fatty acids, packed with vitamins and contains essential minerals such as iron, potassium and zinc. According to the British Deer Society, it also has fewer calories and less cholesterol than most farmed meats. You might struggle to find British venison in your local supermarket but most butchers, farm shops and game dealers will be happy to help. Don't be afraid to ask. As we discovered with rare-breed meat such as Old Spots pork and Gloucester beef in the '80s and '90s, demand can super-charge the market.

There's also a little-known but crucial role that venison plays in helping to feed people in need. For several years I've been working with a food poverty charity that raises money to supply high-protein nutritious meals, including venison, to food banks and community kitchens. In the last decade, the charity has provided millions of meals to needy children and families across the UK and sent another 70,000 meals to the frontline in Ukraine. There's also a nationwide movement for restaurants in Britain to serve more wild venison.

So could deer be food for the future? I'd like to think so. Wouldn't it be fitting if delicious, healthy venison was on the menu in every White Hart pub across the country?

Have your say What do you think about the issues raised here? Write to the address on page three or email **editor@countryfile.com**

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DISCOVER

Secret Dartmoor

Romantic tors, ancient history, friendly pubs, waterfalls and pretty villages – Dartmoor National Park offers the perfect escape. **Fi Darby** reveals the moor's hidden delights

Photos: **Justin Foulkes**

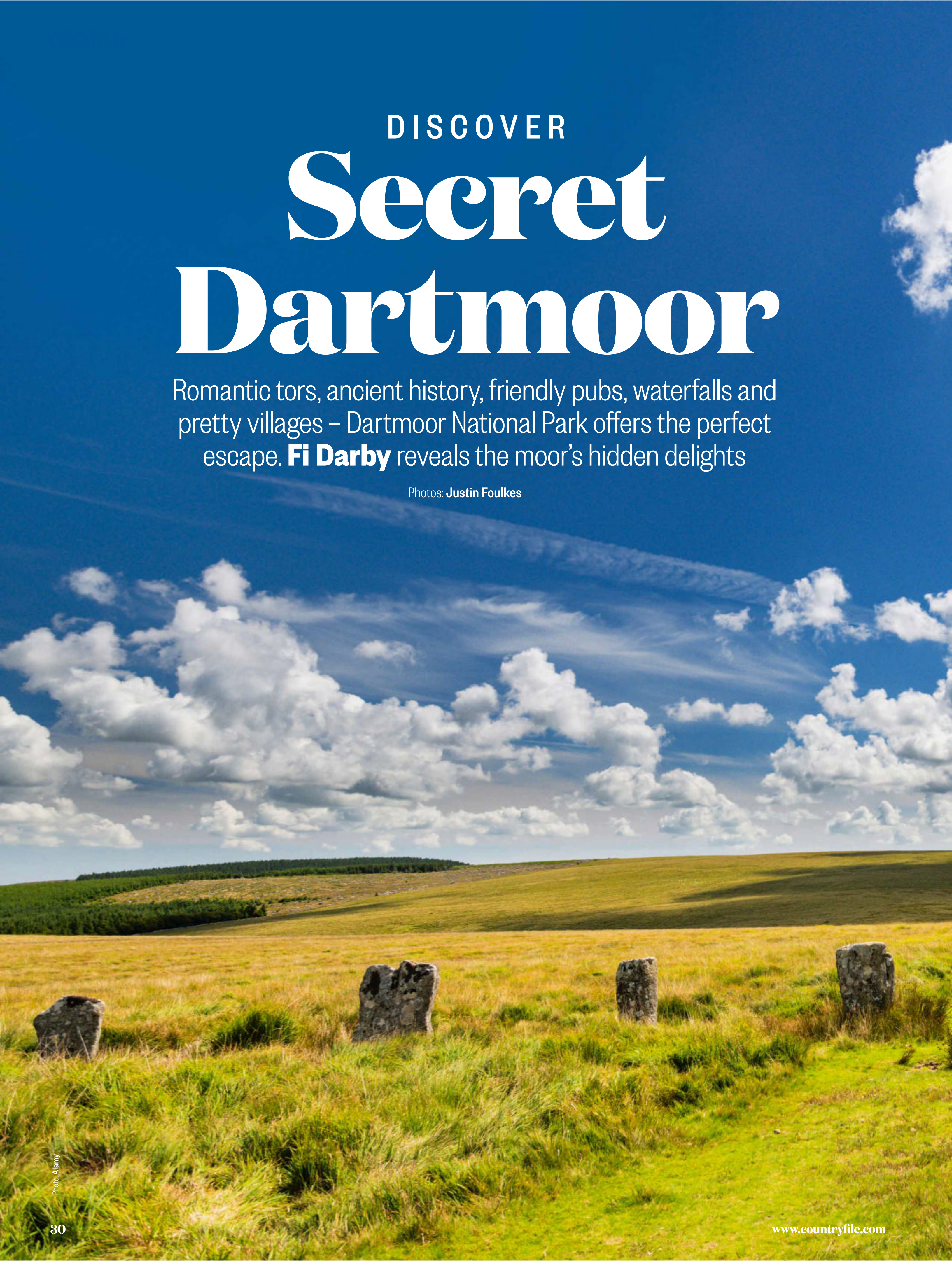


Photo: Alamy

Many myths and legends surround Grey Wethers, the two Bronze-Age stone circles that sit less than five metres apart at the foot of Sittaford Tor in the heart of the national park

FI contemplates the route across the moor to Sittaford Tor, a 5.5km walk from Fernworthy Reservoir

The water murmurs over the rocks below, the skylarks warn high above and the wind whispers promises in my ear. I lie back in the water and feel the strain of the walk up to the river float away from me. Dartmoor is rarely silent, but its joyous breath is always a balm to my soul. I relax. But just for a moment; conditions change quickly up on the high moor and it will soon be time to pitch my tent.

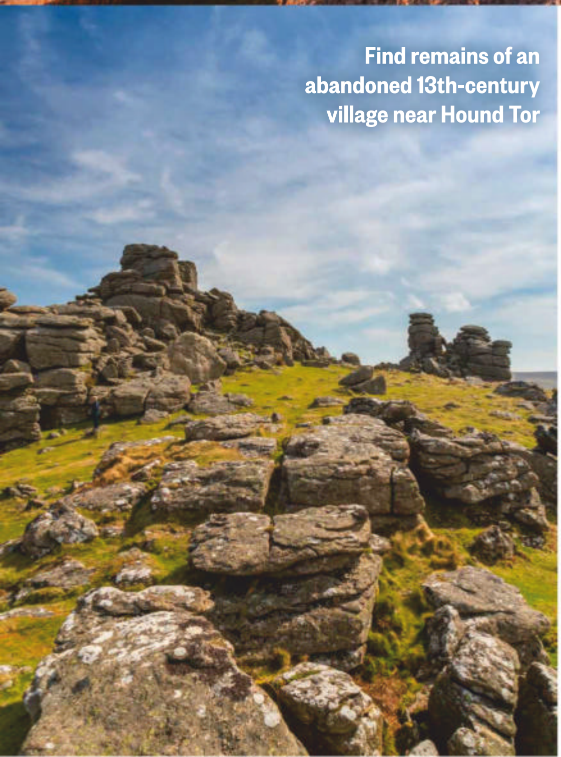
Ask any number of people to describe Dartmoor National Park and you'll get a different answer. Within the bounds of the park you'll discover a multi-faceted landscape, shaped not just by the natural elements but by the people who have lived and worked there. Whether you're balancing across tussocks on the sweeping grasslands of the high moor, exploring green, wooded river valleys or enjoying pastoral farm and village scenes, you'll discover intriguing signs of human occupation wherever you turn.

> **"You'll discover a multi-faceted landscape"**

Although it's impossible not to marvel at Dartmoor's magnificent granite tors and open spaces, for me it's the manmade treasure that give this special place its endless sense of fascination. Where else can you sit in a Bronze Age hut circle, locate an ancient stone cross, cross a river via a medieval clapper bridge, explore 20th-century tin workings and admire the view from a huge stack of rocks? And all on the same walk.

Dartmoor isn't just about places, it's about communities. Contrary to popular belief, most of the land within the 368 square miles of Dartmoor National Park isn't owned by the National Park Authority but by a series of landowners. This diversity of ownership brings both blessings and challenges. Balancing the needs of visitors with those of other

The setting sun paints a soft glow over the teetering granite blocks of Great Staple Tor, 455 metres above sea level



Find remains of an abandoned 13th-century village near Hound Tor

“Wild and craggy, tors rise above the open moor like crumbling castles”

stakeholders has, since the national park’s designation in 1951, been a full-time job for many dedicated people – increasingly challenging work in today’s budget-cutting climate.

RUGGED AND ROMANTIC

One of the most striking features of Dartmoor’s landscape is its distinctive granite tors. You can’t walk or even drive far without spotting one, and suggested numbers range from 160 to over 900 (it depends on how you count them). Wild and craggy, they rise above the open moor like crumbling castles. It’s hard to believe these weathered rocky outcrops were once molten. They’ve been solid for millions of years now and today are popular with tor collectors (known as baggers), view-seekers, climbers and artists.

Dartmoor tors have wonderful appellations. Wild and Steeperton Tors live up to their names but I’ve yet to spot goats at Higher Dunna Goat or bears at Beardown Tor. Some tors are obvious from any direction, but others are sunk into the hill on one side,

Photos: Alamy

Standing on one of Dartmoor's highest points, Great Links Tor is dominated by a 12-metre-high monolithic outcrop of granite

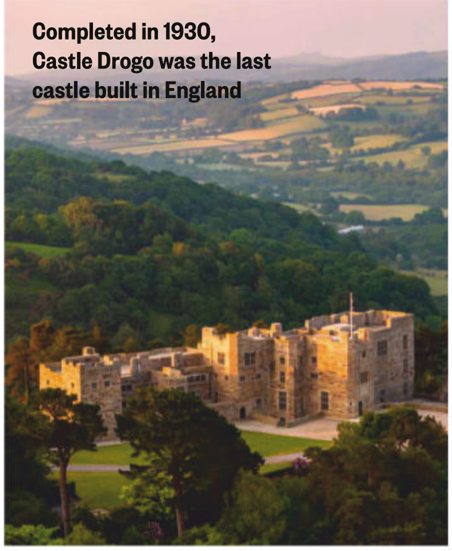
The herbaceous borders in Castle Drogo's gardens are a delight in the months of spring

making them more tricky navigation-markers. If you're new to tor spotting or are walking with children, Haytor and nearby Hound Tor are both easy to reach and fascinating to explore. There are even greater rewards to be found on some lesser-known tors. Rippon Tor is taller than its neighbour, Haytor, and offers a trig pillar as well as stone cairns and a lovely view towards the sea at Tor Bay.

If I was asked to take you to my favourite Dartmoor tor, we might end up gazing at the hefty stacks that make up Great Links Tor or stroking Watern Tor's delicate layers. But unless I knew you well, I wouldn't take you to my best-loved tor. It's a secret. If you keep exploring long enough though, you'll find it without my help.

ANCIENT PLACES

I'd also find it difficult to tell you about my favourite historical location on Dartmoor, but not because I want to keep it quiet – there are just too many to choose from. Look at the map and you'll see the moor is littered with the ruined remains of human occupation. Finding these remnants is what I love doing most. To me a boundary stone missing from the map, or a long row of super-short stones, are just as rewarding as more obvious finds such as the wonderfully atmospheric stone circles at Grey Wethers.



Completed in 1930, Castle Drogo was the last castle built in England

An estate agent would have a hard time selling some of Dartmoor's older properties but relish the thought of taking on others. 'Lonely ruin with a tree growing up the chimney' or 'Roofless building with gunpowder stains' probably wouldn't cut it with the buyers. But show them the gardens at architect Edwin Lutyens' magnificent Castle Drogo or the Bronze-Age stone huts at Grimspound and they might have more luck.

Dartmoor's occupants have left us with more than a treasure hunt of artefacts. Many of the walking and riding routes that circumnavigate and cross the moor have had transport significance for hundreds if not thousands of years. The Templer Way's tramway follows the route stone took from the Haytor quarries down to the sea at Teignmouth; the Abbot's Way crosses remote moorland between Buckfast Abbey and Tavistock Abbey; and the Lych Way was once used to carry coffins from central Dartmoor for burial at Lydford church.

Photos: Alamy

What's left of an ancient clapper bridge can be seen at Dartmeet, where the East and West Dart Rivers join forces

Dartmoor's human occupation is still vibrant and exciting today. With farms, villages, market towns and even a brewery and distillery, you'll never be short of cream teas, hearty breakfasts and a good pint. Visit Princetown for its famous Jail Ale, Widecombe-in-the-Moor for a cream tea and Ashburton for its independent shops.

And don't forget the fascinating churches. Brentor St Michael de Rupe church sits on top of its very own tor; St Peter's at Buckland has replaced the numbers on its clock face with an unusual message; and the south porch of St Winifred's at Manaton has views towards a stone giant.

WHERE RIVERS FLOW

Dartmoor's valleys are just as beautiful as its high points, and they are home to the many rivers that rise from the moor's ecologically important upland peat bogs. The River Dart is Dartmoor's most famous waterway, but its higher reaches can confuse. This is a river with two sources. West Dart Head and East Dart Head are only separated by two-and-a-half miles, but they are rough, boggy miles and few people venture up to visit. Easier to reach, and well worth the hike up from Postbridge, is the East Dart Waterfall. You can cross the river here to head up on to the north moor, but if you have waterproof boots and a compass make your way over to the lonely ruin of Brown's House, where it is said jealous Mr Brown hid his beautiful wife away from the world.

Spot sundews devouring insect snacks in Dartmoor's peatbogs

Further downstream the River Dart becomes more accessible and Dartmeet, where the twin rivers make friends, is a delightful picnic and paddling spot. If you arrive later in the season you may spot kayakers setting in here before they take on the challenges of the Dart Gorge. With grade-four rapids, you can see why only the brave try this, but the lower Dart Gorge does hide a few once-secret outdoor swimming spots, most of which are now too busy to visit in summer but perfect in autumn if you're cold-water acclimatised.

Lesser known than Dartmoor's rivers are its leats. These manmade waterways carry water to local properties as well as the reservoirs that supply many South Devon towns.

Photos: Alamy

> **“Your wet feet will tell you when you reach a bog”**

I especially enjoy walking along the Devonport Leat from Nun’s Cross Farm to Burrator Reservoir. Just too wide for me to jump, the leat here has stone sides and runs fast. It flows so closely with the hill contours that in places it appears to run uphill. A sharper look at the flowing water-weed soon proves this wrong. Along this section alone you’ll find stone crosses, a tunnel, sluices, slab bridges, a wonderful aqueduct and a kink known affectionately to anyone who has ever earned their Dartmoor navigation stripes as ‘Kink-in-Leat’.

OF PEAT AND WOODLAND

It would be wrong to discuss Dartmoor’s rivers without giving a mention to the peatbogs that birth them and give the area such a fearful reputation. There’s nothing quite as disconcerting as walking across the jelly-like landscape of a quaking bog, or quite as smelly as ending up thigh deep in one. Peat, after all, is decomposing vegetable matter. And it is this that makes it such an important holder of both carbon and water. Sadly, Dartmoor’s peatland area has shrunk to 1% of its former size, causing damage to wildlife and increasing the risk of downstream flooding, which is why there are now peat restoration sites right across the moor.

You don’t have to fall in a peatbog to appreciate it, but a map will help you hover just around the edge of one. Follow the army tracks to Okement Hill then continue south towards Cranmere Pool. Your wet feet will tell you when you’ve reached a bog. While you’re there, look and listen for skylarks or groups of golden plover and keep your eyes open for sphagnum mosses, fluffy cotton grass and, if you’re lucky, carnivorous sundews.

The most obvious of Dartmoor’s woodlands are its forestry plantations. With their hard edges and prominent positions, these coniferous areas are strikingly recognisable features on the moor’s soft landscape. Dartmoor’s native broadleaf woodlands are more secretive. Concentrated on steep river valley sides, the twisted branches, deep green mosses and fascinating lichens of these ancient upland oak woods give them a fairytale quality. In truth, however, these delicate environments need our protection.

Protect the lichens and mosses by taking the path around the outside of Wistman’s Wood rather than entering

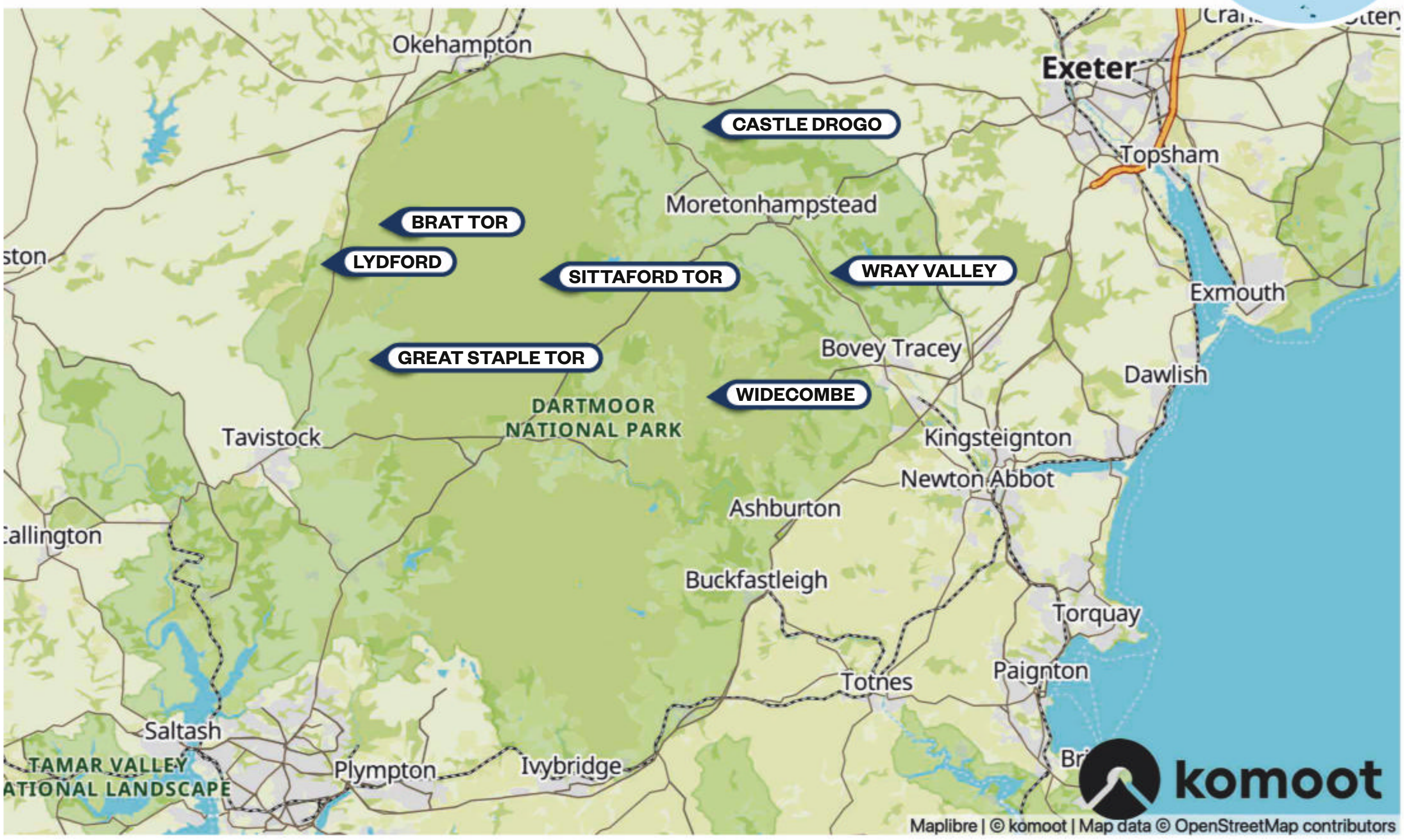
Wistman’s Wood is perhaps the most well-known of Dartmoor’s native temperate rainforests, but in the last decade this beautiful place has been over publicised with larger visitor numbers putting its delicate mosses and lichen at risk. The good news is you don’t have to visit the high moor to experience Dartmoor’s woodlands. Climb over boulders and dip under lichen-hung trees along the shady paths of Belstone Cleave, or follow a section of the Dartmoor Way through Bovey Valley Woods to paddle at beautiful Hisley Bridge.

It’s impossible to visit Dartmoor without feeling drawn into its stories. Whether historical or modern day, it is these tales, legends and happenings that give this unique landscape the place it has in so many people’s hearts. You’re unlikely to become pixie-led in the mist, but you will be writing your own chapter of Dartmoor’s history.

Fi Darby is a writer, content creator, a Duke of Edinburgh Award expedition leader and an Ordnance Survey Champion based in Devon.
fidarby.co.uk

NOW GO THERE

Fi Darby on where to eat, sleep and visit on Dartmoor


Okehampton
Exeter
Topsham
Exmouth
Dawlish
CASTLE DROGO
Moretonhampstead
BRAT TOR
LYDFORD
SITTAFORD TOR
WRAY VALLEY
GREAT STAPLE TOR
Bovey Tracey
WIDECOMBE
DARTMOOR NATIONAL PARK
Tavistock
Kingsteignton
Newton Abbot
Ashburton
Callington
Buckfastleigh
Torquay
Paignton
Totnes
Saltash
TAMAR VALLEY NATIONAL LANDSCAPE
Plympton
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WALKS

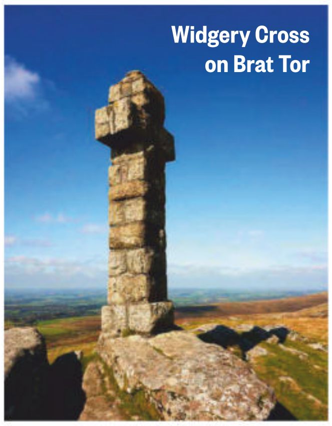
One of the best things about Dartmoor is its variety of routes. Whether you want to navigate across tussocky moorland, wander leafy lanes or climb a hill for a sea view, Dartmoor offers plenty of choice. Here are three between two and eight miles long.

BRAT TOR

A short, sharp hill climb and high moorland views. Park just behind the Dartmoor Inn pub near Lydford, cross the bubbling River Lyd then head up the hill to admire Widgery Cross.

SITTAFORD TOR

For a rewarding day's walk, access it from Postbridge car park (take your map and compass). Head up the east side of the East Dart River until you reach the Grey Wethers stone circles then follow the wall up to Sittaford Tor. Walk on a bearing to Sandy Hole Pass then follow the river downstream to cross at the waterfall. Aim for the wall junction at Broad Down then take the path back down to Postbridge.


Widgery Cross on Brat Tor

WRAY VALLEY TRAIL

The waymarked Wray Valley Trail is open to walkers, horseriders and cyclists and follows, mostly, the disused Wray Valley Railway between Bovey Tracey and Moretonhampstead. Start at either end and allow time to enjoy a cuppa in pretty Lustleigh.

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

WARREN HOUSE INN, POSTBRIDGE

The place to end a bracing winter walk as the fire's not gone out since the 19th century. Perched high above a fascinating mining complex, this inn has remarkable views. **warrenhouseinn.co.uk**

OLD INN, WIDECOMBE

You're unlikely to bump into Uncle Tom Cobley unless you arrive for Widecombe Fair in September, but you will find the Old Inn, which is ideal for spacious family dining. **oldinnwidecombe.co.uk**

RUGGLESTONE INN, WIDECOMBE

Another Widecombe winner, the Rugglestone Inn is great for local ale and has a lovely beer garden for summer. **rugglestoneinn.co.uk**

ULLACOMBE FARM CAFÉ

Dog-friendly Ullacombe Farm Café (above) offers hearty breakfasts. Choose a picnic lunch from the deli counter before you set out for your walk. **ullacombefarm.co.uk**

CAFÉ ON THE GREEN

Head to the Café on the Green in Widecombe for the obligatory Devonshire cream tea. **thecafeonthegreen.co.uk**

Photos: Alamy

RUGGLESTONE INN ½
THE OLD INN
ENTRANCE

Enjoy a relaxed meal at Widecombe's Old Inn, a Grade-II listed building

ACCOMMODATION

WRAY VALLEY CAMPING

At Wray Valley Camping, just off the Wray Valley Trail, you'll find eco-friendly facilities and the welcoming Riverside B&B as well as beautiful meadow and woodland pitches. **wrayvalley.co.uk**

THE RAMBLERS' REST

If you're walking near Princetown, The Ramblers' Rest guesthouse has a bubbling hot tub to soothe aching limbs, a drying room for wet boots and lovely hotel-style rooms, each with its own basic self-catering facilities. **ramblersrest.uk**

TWO BRIDGES HOTEL

If you're looking to treat yourself, opt for a warm welcome and comfortable sleep at the Two Bridges Hotel in the heart of the park. While you're there, we recommend you sample their award-winning food, sourced from local Devon farmers, fishers and producers. **twobridges.co.uk**

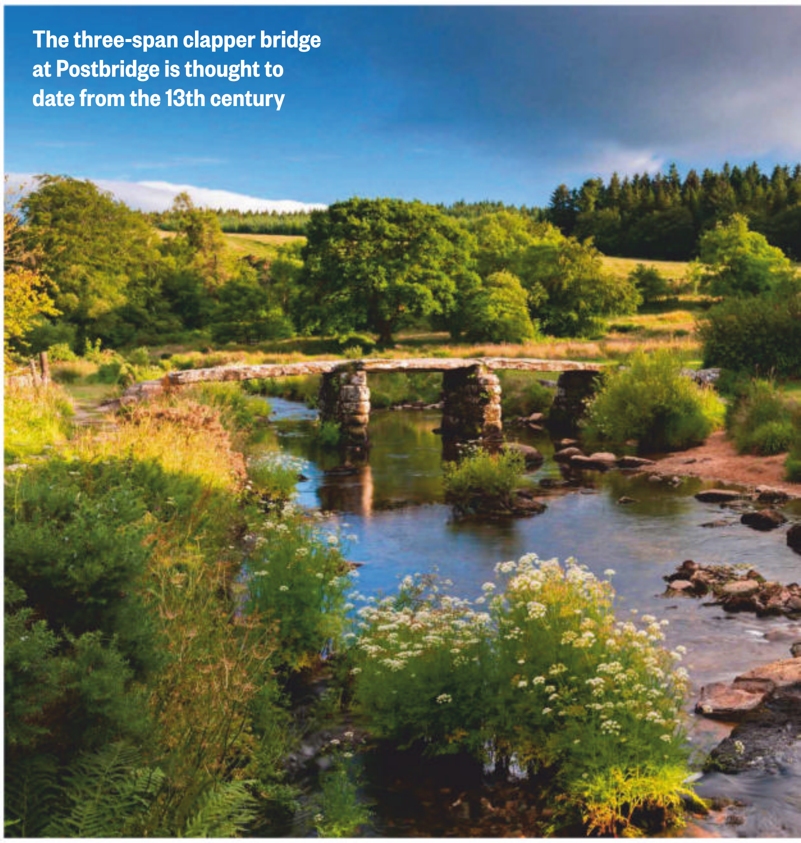
Check you're in the right spot before pitching

WILD CAMP

My favourite way to camp on Dartmoor is to pack my tent and sleeping bag in my rucksack and head off for a bit of wild camping. Although Dartmoor is the only place in England where you can backpack camp without the landowner's permission, you can't do this everywhere and there is a code of conduct. Find information and the wild camping area map at **dartmoor.gov.uk**.

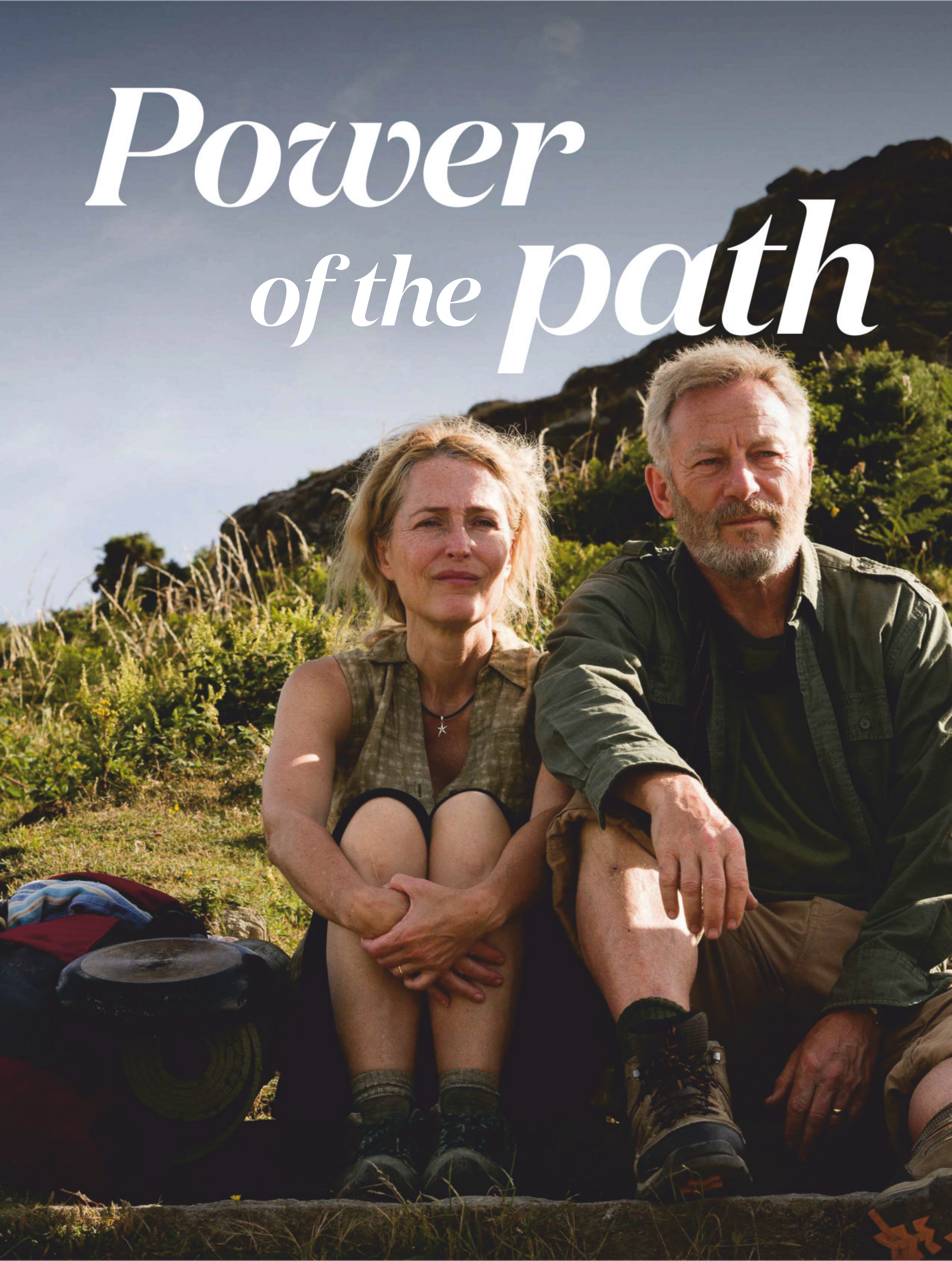
MUSEUMS

Dartmoor has a tale or two to tell. Find out how to escape gaol at Dartmoor Prison Museum (left, dartmoor-prison.co.uk), discover how Jobbers Road got its name at the Museum of Dartmoor Life (dartmoorlife.org.uk) or visit England's last working water-powered forge at the National Trust's Finch Foundry (nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/devon/finch-foundry).



The three-span clapper bridge at Postbridge is thought to date from the 13th century

Power of the path



Gillian Anderson and Jason Isaacs star in the film of Raynor Winn's memoir *The Salt Path,* directed by Marianne Elliott

With the film adaptation of *The Salt Path* incoming, **Vivienne Crow** chats to author Raynor Winn on how the book changed her life and what it's like to see Gillian Anderson play her on the big screen

There are dozens of books out there about long-distance paths. Writers tell of battling storms, relaxing in cosy B&Bs, being chased by bullocks or delighting in wildlife encounters. They don't usually face castigation from strangers or need to count out pennies to calculate whether they can afford to eat.

Homelessness and degenerative brain diseases don't usually figure either. But these were the realities when Raynor Winn and her husband Moth started walking the South West Coast Path in 2013, an experience Raynor wrote about in her bestselling book *The Salt Path*.

> **"That was the lowest point in our lives"**

For the previous 20 years, the couple had lived on a farm in the Welsh hills; it had been their beloved family home as well as their source of income. Then they lost it all in a legal battle. At the same time, Moth was diagnosed with a rare brain disease called corticobasal syndrome (CBS). Doctors advised taking things easy. So the couple, in their 50s, bought a cheap tent and set off on 630 miles of rugged cliff hiking along the famous National Trail.

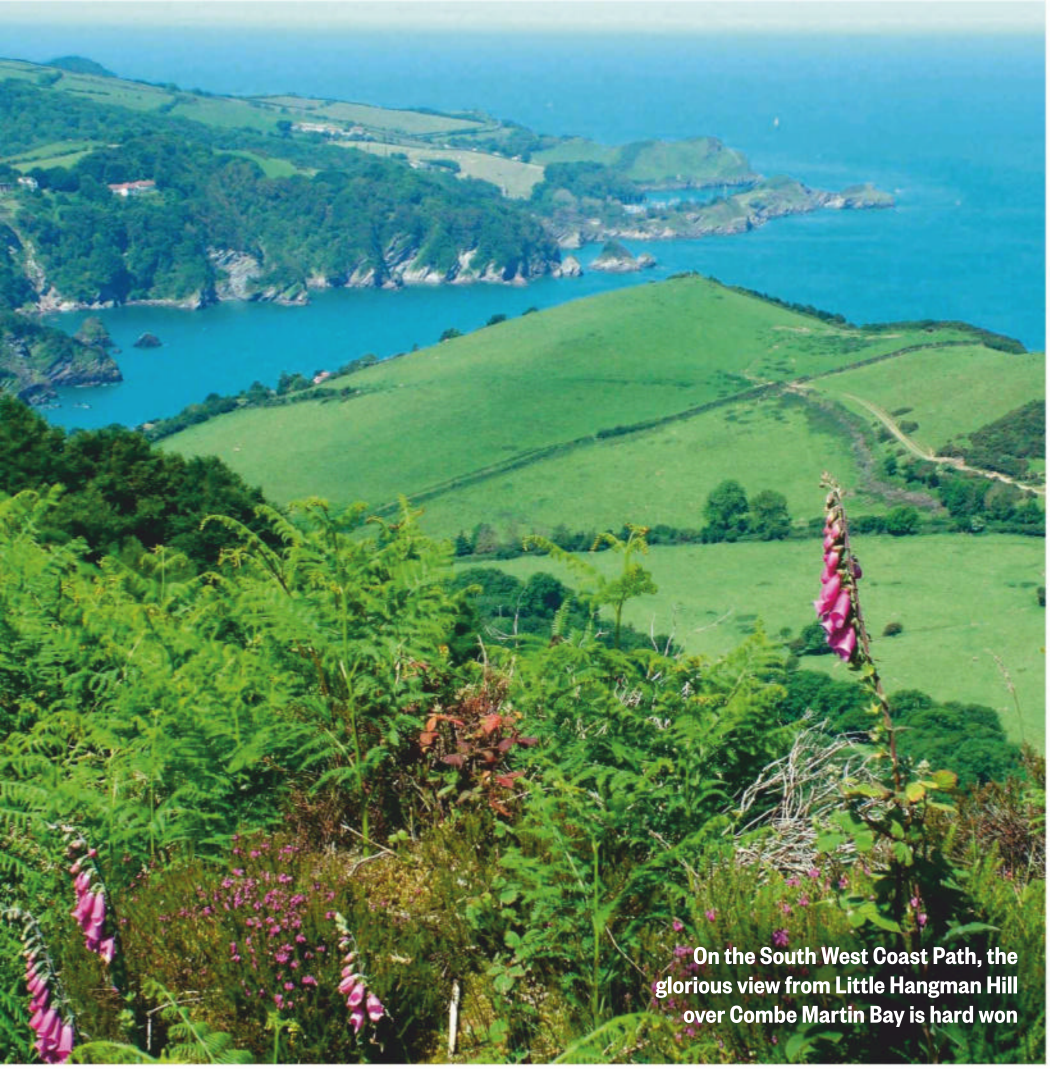
The Salt Path tells of this journey, the hardships they experienced but also the glories of the landscape and nature's redemptive powers when you have little choice but to put one foot in front of the other and focus on survival. Described by *The Guardian* as a "beautiful, thoughtful, lyrical story of homelessness, human strength and endurance", the book's life-affirming story has proved a big hit, selling more than two million copies worldwide.

That success has had a profound impact on the lives of Raynor and Moth. Not long after publication, an appreciative reader asked if they'd take on the rundown farm he owned near Fowey in Cornwall. Their experience of restoring the Georgian farmhouse and of nurturing the land to benefit wildlife forms the basis of Raynor's second bestseller, *The Wild Silence*. With a third book under her belt – *Landlines* – and a fourth due out later this year, the couple now live on Cornwall's Lizard Peninsula.

"Life couldn't be more different," says Raynor, describing the journey from losing their home to becoming a full-time writer and the subject of a new film starring Gillian Anderson and Jason Isaacs. "Before walking the coast path, we lived on a small farm we'd restored from a ruin. That was our life: the building work, then letting it out to visitors, growing vegetables, keeping chickens and sheep, our children growing up and going to university... But then we lost that. That was the lowest point in our lives. We had nothing. We'd lost everything we'd worked so hard to build."

And then came *The Salt Path*. She describes the publication of the book itself as "an absolute miracle". It was intended only as a gift for Moth. "As the CBS progressed, he was losing

Photo: Steven Tanner/*The Salt Path*



On the South West Coast Path, the glorious view from Little Hangman Hill over Combe Martin Bay is hard won

Reaching Land's End was a turning point for Raynor and Moth, inspiring hope and the will to carry on

> **"I felt this huge maelstrom of emotions"**

his memories of the path. I just wanted to capture it for him." She printed it off, tied it with string and gave it to him for his birthday. A gift for her teenage sweetheart that went on to inspire thousands of readers.

PIVOTAL MOMENTS

Many of those readers have since walked the coast path themselves, and Raynor has a key piece of advice for anyone doing the trail in one go: start in Dorset, not Somerset. "All the guidebooks tell you to start in Minehead, but that coast – Exmoor and north Devon – is the toughest bit." Exmoor National Park is home to the highest point on the trail, Great Hangman Hill, which looms 318m over the Bristol Channel. Walkers starting in Somerset reach it on day three or four. "If I were doing it again – and I've promised myself I will do – I would start in Poole, so that by the time I got to Devon, I'd be ready for it; I'd be able to appreciate the beauty of it rather than just feeling the agony. "

By the time she and Moth passed from Devon into north Cornwall, the trail was beginning to change them. "One of my favourites stretches – and one I often go back to – is from Zennor round Land's End to Porthcurno and the Minack. We reached Land's End on a wild, stormy day, when the sea was rolling in and breaking over those beautiful, blocky granite cliffs. I remember there were fish flying in the air!" She throws her arms up to convey the power and energy of the scene.

"It was the most incredible place: a turning point in the land, but a turning point for us as well. Up until then, we could still have given up, but there, in that wild weather, just the two of us on the very edge of the land, we realised how much that path had given us. How much hope we'd got back – something we thought we'd never feel again."

Aside from checking the script and visiting the set, Raynor had little input

Using real South West Coast Path locations for the film was hugely important to Raynor

into the making of the film that tells the story of their months on the trail. Her face lights up as she recalls the moment when she learned Gillian Anderson – celebrated for her roles in *The X-Files*, *The Crown*, crime drama *The Fall* and many more on both stage and screen – was going to play her. "I was in the garden when I took the call. My immediate reaction was, 'Oh, my God! She's so glamorous!' I went inside and told Moth, and he said, 'I don't know if that's going to work.'" He'd thought she'd said Pamela Anderson of *Baywatch* fame.

The one thing Raynor did feel strongly about was geography. "It needed to be filmed on the coast path itself, because that, for us, was the whole point of the journey. It was like the third character – Ray, Moth and the coast path." One location she felt worked particularly well was the Valley of Rocks near Lynton, a striking landscape where feral goats roam among rock towers perched on cliff edges. "I hadn't been back there, so watching the characters, Ray and Moth, walking over the headland, wearing clothes similar to ours, same rucksacks, was like being shunted back in time. I felt this huge maelstrom of emotions like I'd experienced when we first walked the trail. It was unexpected and overwhelming; I had to stand back from the filming for a while and let it settle."

> "The coast path was like the third character"

CAUSE FOR OPTIMISM

That rush of emotions returned again when Raynor first saw the film. "I ran out of tissues, that's for sure!" she laughs in recalling her reaction. "Gillian Anderson really embraced the role and Jason Isaacs was brilliant in the way he captured Moth. There were points when I looked away, then glanced back at the screen and, for a second, I thought it really was Moth. It was fantastic to see how they'd captured the essence of the path. It wasn't just a route they were following; it was something that was almost embracing them. I thought that was beautifully done."

She hopes other people will feel the power of the landscape when they watch the film – and the power of nature to transform lives. "But the biggest thing I hope they take away is that they see homelessness differently; if they walk out of the cinema and see somebody in a shop doorway, they see them as a human being with their own story rather than a statistic."

Raynor believes the book has already had an impact in this sense, but realises change won't happen overnight. In one chapter, when she falls while trying to retrieve precious fallen coins, she is abused in the street as a "tramp" by a woman walking a dog. "We're full of preconceptions of what homelessness is and about people who become homeless, so it's a long journey to changing mindsets." The film should also raise

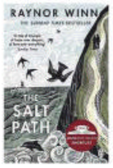
Photo: Alamy; Steven Tanner/*The Salt Path*

Raynor and Moth (centre) with Gillian and Jason at the Valley of Rocks in Exmoor

Photo: Steven Tanner/The Salt Path

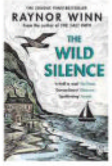
TALES OF THE COUNTRYSIDE

From Cornwall to Cape Wrath: Raynor Winn's three published books



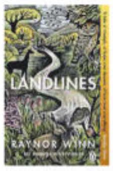
THE SALT PATH, 2018

Homeless and penniless after losing their farm and business, Raynor and Moth set off on the 630-mile South West Coast Path. Over the next few months, despite Moth's recent diagnosis with a degenerative brain disease, the couple are transformed by the trail.



THE WILD SILENCE, 2020

Returning to civilisation after months on the trail, Raynor and Moth feel cut off from the natural world that helped revitalise them. So, when offered a chance to take on and rewild a farm, they barely hesitate. Again, this is the shot in the arm they needed.



LANDLINES, 2022

With Moth's condition deteriorating, Raynor hopes walking will boost him as it has in the past. They set out on a 1,000-mile journey from Scotland to south-west England. This book also describes a country facing uncertainties.

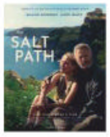
awareness of CBS. This progressive, life-limiting neurological disease causes a gradual decline in movement, memory and speech. Raynor says the book has been quoted among physiotherapists and occupational therapists who understand the need for movement in treating the disease. When Moth was first diagnosed, though, he was told to avoid getting too tired and to be careful on stairs. "That's understandable, as those with the condition do need to take the greatest care but, alongside that, maintaining muscle strength for as long as possible is vitally important."

STRENGTH IN MIND AND BODY

She hints that some of these issues will feature in her fourth book – as yet unnamed – due out in September. "It's very much about our connection to nature – and the power of movement." Researchers are investigating this, but further work needs to be done to link these studies and produce a more rounded approach to treatment.

Last year, she and Moth walked part of the 185-mile Thames Path to raise money for PSPA, the charity that raises awareness, supports sufferers and funds research into CBS and progressive supranuclear palsy, a closely related illness. This gentler riparian ramble was a contrast to the coast path; it was more about seeing how people connected with this limited "artery of nature" and was also a response to Moth's deteriorating health. "You've got to adapt to your strengths and weaknesses and not let those weaknesses stop you doing what you want to do. You can walk down a river instead of over the mountains, for example," she adds, comparing the Thames Path with the subject of *Landlines* – a gruelling journey they made through the Scottish Highlands and down the length of England.

Meanwhile, Raynor's rucksack is packed, ready for her next long-distance adventure. There's a glint in her eye as she anticipates lacing up her walking boots again and opening herself to all the trail has to offer, but she's unwilling to share more details. Maybe we'll find out when she writes her fifth book. CF



***The Salt Path* will be released in UK cinemas on 30 May. The paperback book is published by Penguin Michael Joseph (£10.99).**

Vivienne Crow is an award-winning outdoor writer, author and photographer based in Cumbria who has a love of walking and nature.

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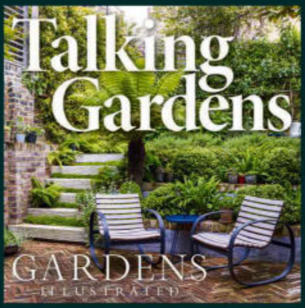

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ADVERTISEMENT FEATURE

A growing tribute

Discover the National Memorial Arboretum, the UK's year-round centre of remembrance where trees play a special role in reflection and celebration

Located in the heart of the Midlands, the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire is a place of reflection, growth and hope. The Arboretum may only be young but visit its beautiful grounds and you'll discover a living, growing tribute to those who have served and continue to serve our country. The 150-acre site is a haven for nature lovers with a variety of landscapes and over 25,000 trees, a large proportion of which are treasured native species. Explore woodlands, wildflower meadows and gardens, as well as riverside habitats along the Rivers Tame and Trent, all providing scenic backdrops for meaningful walks.

STRONG ROOTS

The botanical offerings of the Arboretum are not accidental. Species of trees planted near memorials have been carefully considered and are often chosen to symbolise or memorialise the story of groups remembered. Visit The Beat, an area of the Arboretum that commemorates the service of the police and you'll see plenty of native horse chestnut trees, as this type of wood was used to create the first police truncheons. Elsewhere you'll find oak trees planted in tribute to merchant ships lost. The Arboretum has even been awarded National Plant Collection status by Plant Heritage for its *hamamelis* (witch hazel) collection, which features over 300 specimens of this beautiful winter-flowering shrub.

REFLECT IN NATURE

Dotted amongst the greenery, you'll find over 400 memorials celebrating tales of bravery shown in the most extraordinary of times, as well as selfless service, sacrifice, camaraderie and care. From the Armed Forces and Emergency Services to civilian organisations that supported our nation in times of need, people from all walks of life are represented by the memorials at the Arboretum – each designed to reflect the stories of those they represent. Visit this living, growing tribute and pay homage while appreciating nature up close.

The National Memorial Arboretum is open 364 days a year and entry is free (a daily parking charge applies).

NATIONAL
MEMORIAL
ARBORETUM

Visit **thenma.org.uk** or call **01283 245 100** for more information and to plan your visit.

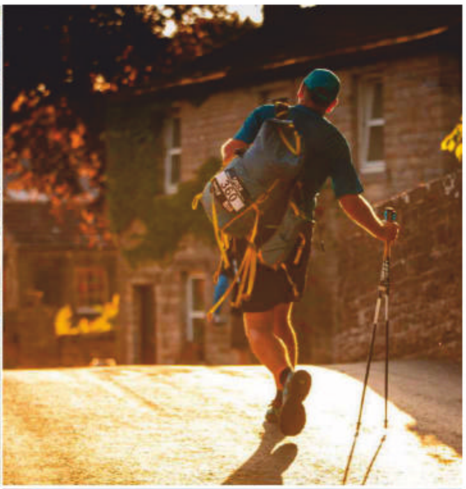
© Image: IWM HU_049482

THE YEAR WAS 1945...

3 May–16 November 2025

The Arboretum offers a programme of activities reflecting on the significant events that brought about the end of the Second World War, marking the anniversaries of both VE and VJ Day.

- **VE Day Celebrations 3–5 May** Enjoy a weekend of free activities inspired by the street party spirit of 1945, including live performances and 1940s inspired dance workshops.
- **Exhibition Programme** Four brand-new temporary exhibitions within the Arboretum's Remembrance Centre will explore the real-life experiences of those who lived through 1945.
- **Tours & trails** Join expert Arboretum volunteer guides and listen to personal stories from the Second World War, from military units to civilian organisations.
- **Guest speaker talks** On selected dates, discover what life was like for those who lived 80 years ago and the impact the war had on their lives.



TOP 10 BRITAIN'S TOUGHEST CHALLENGES

Prepare to be amazed and inspired by these extreme tests of mind and body, plus some easier alternatives

Photos: Alamy; Green Events; Sport Pictures Cymru; Chillswim; Bob Girling, Mourne MM, Beyond the Ultimate; David Gonthier

Man V Horse

Llanwrtyd Wells, Powys, Wales

Man V Horse began, as all great events should, following a debate in the pub (the Neuadd Arms in Llanwrtyd Wells) over the merits of humans and horses over mountainous terrain. Beers duly sunk, the first Man V Horse race was in 1980, and it's now become an established annual event where runners pit their endurance capabilities against horses over a 22-mile course in Llanwrtyd Wells, in the hills of mid-Wales.

The course has a six-hour time cut-off and starts outside the Neuadd Arms. The route takes in the trails, roads and hills of the South Cambrian Mountains in mid-Wales.

The runners may have a 15-minute head start over the horses (and riders), but the equine contestants have long dominated this hoof-friendly podium. It took 25 years for a horse to relinquish the top spot. In 2004 Huw Lobb took home £25,000 as the first human victor; the escalating jackpot increases by £500 for every year that a horse wins.

Equine entrants have only lost four times in the event's 45-year history. But, with human victories in 2022 and 2023, could the momentum now be shifting to those on two legs? We'll find out when Man V Horse returns on 14 June in 2025. **Matt Baird**

green-events.co.uk

EASIER ALTERNATIVES

Man V Horse organiser Green Events specialises in offbeat races, with 2025's roster including Mountain Bike Chariot Racing (9 August) and the World Bog Snorkelling Championships (24 August).

Photo: Green Events

TRIATHLON

2

Slateman Ultra
Llanberis, Wales

A 2.4-mile open-water swim before 112 miles on the bike and a 26.2-mile marathon run. Or the equivalent of swimming from London Bridge to Big Ben, cycling to Bristol and then running to Glastonbury. In less than 17 hours. There's a reason an Ironman triathlon is seen as the ultimate endurance sport.

Not content with 140.6 miles of pushing competitors' minds and bodies to the limits, race organisers also offer 'extreme' Irons, of which the Slateman Ultra (8 June 2025) in Eryri is arguably the UK's toughest.

The action begins with a 2.4-mile swim in Llanberis' chilly Llyn Padarn before the 112-mile bike leg takes on Pen-y-Pass twice. But the 49.9km run course is the real test, taking on the climbs within the Dinorwic slate quarry UNESCO World Heritage Site before venturing up to the summit of Yr Wyddfa (Snowdon) and its limb-shaking descent back to Llanberis.

Matt Baird

alwaysaimhighevents.com

EASIER ALTERNATIVES

There are less hardcore Slateman events over the weekend, including run/bike/run duathlon and sprint triathlon options. The latter involves a 750m swim, a 20km bike before a 5.8km run.

Cape Wrath Trail, Scotland

Cape Wrath is closer to the Arctic Circle than it is to London – no wonder, then, that it's one of Great Britain's wildest walks in a land of ferocious drama and quiet beauty.

Beginning in Fort William in the Scottish Highlands and ending at the British mainland's highest sea cliffs at Cape Wrath, the unmarked trail takes around two to three weeks to complete and boasts an elevation gain of 13,249m (58m per mile) over its 230-mile route.

A lack of services means walkers need to carry food between resupply points as well as camping gear, if the free bothies along the route are full. Sections of the way are pathless, so strong navigation skills are essential, while boot-engulfing bogs and river crossings make the notion of dry feet but a distant dream.

In many ways, however, the hardships of the trail are a reflection of its splendour, and it is perhaps the most isolated sections that burn the brightest in the hiker's soul. **Daniel Graham**

HIKING TRAILS

3

EASIER ALTERNATIVE

No long-distance trail is easy, but if you want to avoid hills and rugged terrain then the Peddars Way connecting with Norfolk Coast Path has an elevation gain of just 600m over its 130-mile route.

WATERSPORTS

4

DW International Canoe Race, Wiltshire to London

Imagine paddling non-stop for 125 miles down the River Thames... well, that's exactly what determined paddlers have been doing every Easter weekend since 1948.

The Devizes to Westminster International Canoe Race (DW) is the world's longest non-stop canoe competition; paddlers begin their journey in Devizes, Wiltshire, then navigate 77 locks into the heart of London. There are a few different ways you can complete the race. The Senior Doubles class tackles the event non-stop, which involves paddling through the night in a time-trial-style race. It's endurance racing in its prime and the current record for completing the DW this way stands at 15 hours. **dwrace.co.uk**

In the UK's whitewater calendar, meanwhile, the annual Moriston Enduro (16 August) is no doubt the hardest race. The one-day event rallies the toughest kayakers to test their skill and fitness against a 500-metre section of whitewater on the River Moriston in the Scottish Highlands. Whoever completes the most laps of the river in three hours is declared the winner.

Beth Hall

EASIER ALTERNATIVES

Alongside the Senior Doubles class, there are four more stage classes in the DW event. Competitors have set times in which they can paddle and camp along the route overnight.

Photos: Sport Pictures Cymru; Alamy

OPEN-WATER SWIMMING

5

Lake District Triple Crown, Cumbria

Coniston. Ullswater. Windermere. Home of gentle boat rides and family days out, of course, but these vast lakes also host plenty of open-water swimming events. And the Chillswim Triple Crown is the mother of all Lakeland swim challenges, awarded to entrants who complete an end-to-end swim of all three lakes in the same year.

The distances (5.25 miles in Coniston on 21 June; 7.5 miles in Ullswater on 12 July; 11 miles in Windermere on 6 Sept) are enough to make many swimmers' toes curl, but what makes them so testing is the unpredictable nature of the weather and water conditions in each lake. Although it's the middle distance of the three, swimmers often report that the 7.5 miles in Ullswater is the toughest due to its crosswinds and bracing waters (around 14°C in July). **Helen Webster**
chillswim.com

EASIER ALTERNATIVE

Sticking in the Lakes, the Arla Great North Swim (13 June) in Windermere has a 250m option for beginners and young swimmers (8+), as well as longer options up to 10km. greatswim.org

CYCLING

6

Fred Whitton Challenge, Cumbria

A tussle with topography! A wrestle with the weather! The infamous 113-mile Lake District cycling sportive that is the Fred Whitton Challenge (11 May 2025) has been tormenting cyclists since 1999 with its 3,170m of climbing over the major Lakeland passes – hello Kirkstone, Honister and Hardknott – and is not for the inexperienced cyclist.

Climb-heavy throughout, the tension cranks up towards the finale with the calf-shredding trilogy of ascents at the 98-mile marker, starting with the almost comedically steep 30% gradient of Hardknott Pass (pictured). The Tarmac terror continues with the 393m-high Wrynose, before Blea Tarn adds a final sucker punch, which is similarly steep and savage on both the approach and exit, so much so that I nearly went over the handlebars on the descent here in 2021.

But the course does offer the greatest scenic hits of the Lake District; there are worse places for a post-event gingerbread and nap than Grasmere. **Matt Baird**
fredwhittonchallenge.co.uk

EASIER ALTERNATIVE

Forty miles on a bike isn't to be sniffed at, but the Etape Caledonia sportive (11 May 2025) in Pitlochry offers roads that are closed to motorised traffic on its rolling Highlands route. etapecaledonia.com

PARKRUN

7

Parkrun Great Yarmouth, Norfolk

From the humble beginnings of 13 runners and three volunteers at London's Bushy Park in 2004, parkrun has become a global phenomenon. The 5km timed and free events (they're not known as races) are held in parks, woodlands, hills, beaches and open spaces across the globe on Saturday mornings for adults (5km) and Sunday mornings for juniors (2km).

Not all parkruns are equal, however. They can vary widely in difficulty and many offer a challenge to even experienced runners. While Whinlatter in the Lake District is the hilliest parkrun in the UK (with 200m of elevation gain), the Great Yarmouth North Beach Parkrun in Norfolk is considered to be the toughest course due to its energy-sapping sandy terrain. Runners come from far and wide to face the nation's slowest parkrun, which has an average finish time of 38:35. **MB**

parkrun.org.uk

EASIER ALTERNATIVE

If Yarmouth is the slowest, the UK's fastest parkrun course is thought to be Pegwell Bay in Kent, with its pancake-flat course and wide gravel tracks leading to an average finish time of just 28:40.

Mourne Mountain Marathon, Northern Ireland

A hiking event with some orienteering thrown into the mix, the Mourne Mountain Marathon in Northern Ireland will celebrate its 46th edition in 2025 (20–21 September).

A host of categories are on offer, with the second-toughest 'B Class' option tasking experienced hikers, orienteerers or trail runners with a 45km route over two days. On paper, not so hardcore perhaps. In reality, the organisers make things devilish by only providing the two-person teams with a route card on the morning of each day, only identified by six-figure map references.

Pairs must also be self-sufficient, camp overnight and carry all of their kit with them.

There's also the matter of the remote and impenetrable Mourne Mountains, the granite range of peaks that looms over County Down and includes Northern Ireland's highest mountain, Slieve Donard (850m). **MB**

mourne2day.com

HIKING EVENTS

8

EASIER ALTERNATIVE

The Mourne Mountain Marathon organisers offer a 'Score Class' option for teams of two, involving a minimum 15km hike between control points over a day, with a six-hour time limit.

Photos: Chillswim, Alamy, Bob Girling, Mourne Mountain Marathon

ULTRA RUNS

9

Montane Summer Spine Race, Northern England

The Pennine Way from the Peak District to the Scottish border is Britain's classic National Trail; 268 miles of remote uplands and some of England's natural wonders. Expect to take 15–20 days to walk it. For the time poor and athletically gifted, however, there is another way.

The non-stop Montane Summer Spine Race (15 June 2025) has a reputation alongside the Dragon's Back Race in Wales as Britain's toughest ultra-running event. It demands runners finish the trail in just 6.5 days. The route starts in Edale in the Peak District, before runners traverse the national parks of the Yorkshire Dales and Northumberland to reach Kirk Yetholm in the Scottish Borders. Some 10,732m of ascent needs to be sprinted, shuffled or crawled, and it's all unsupported. **MB**

thespinerace.com

EASIER ALTERNATIVE

If a 268-mile run isn't your bag, there are shorter options on offer throughout the Montane Summer Spine's weekend, including the 'Sprint South' option: merely 46 miles with an 18-hour time limit.

Endurancelife Exmoor, Somerset

Endurancelife has been offering hugely testing coastal trail runs around the UK for years, but this marathon-length brute on 10 May 2025 has long been touted as its toughest British challenge. As our *Salt Path* feature (page 40) highlights, Exmoor is an underrated and hilly terrain: a land of towering sea cliffs, rugged moors and wooded combes, all of which feature on this 26.7-mile beast of a race.

Starting near Martinhoe in the quieter western area of one of England's least visited and smallest national parks, the route includes stretches of the South West Coast Path – at its most vertiginous in Countisbury and the Valley of Rocks – as well as deep inland valleys. And all on an unforgiving underfoot terrain of rocks, grass and forest trails.

The mighty elevation gain of 1,850m ensures a long day out at both ends of the field; the winners take around four hours and the final athletes will be closer to the eight-hour mark. Don't forget to pack your blister patches. **MB**

endurancelife.com

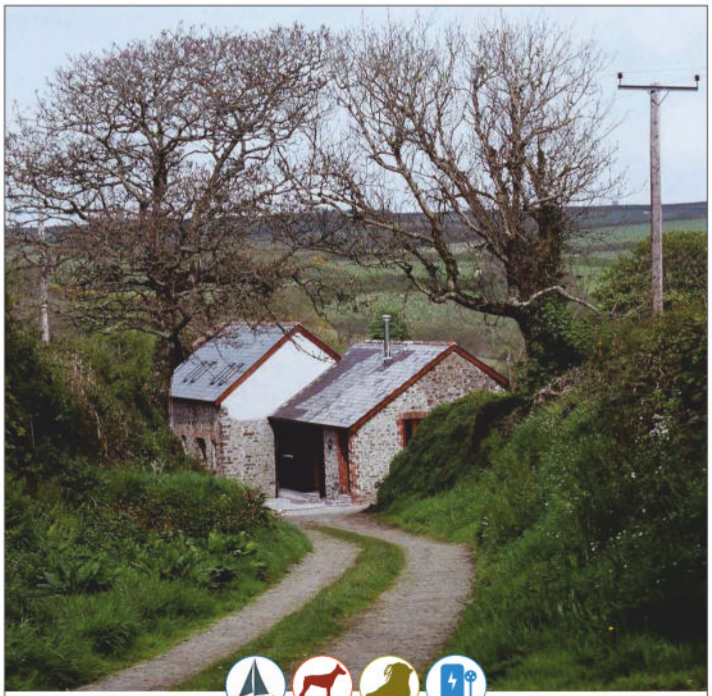
MARATHONS

10

EASIER ALTERNATIVE

Endurancelife also offers a 6.3-mile option in Exmoor. Admittedly, with 451m of climbing it's still tough and most of the field will take well over an hour to finish, but the sea views will soften the pain.

Photos: Beyond the Ultimate, David Gonthier



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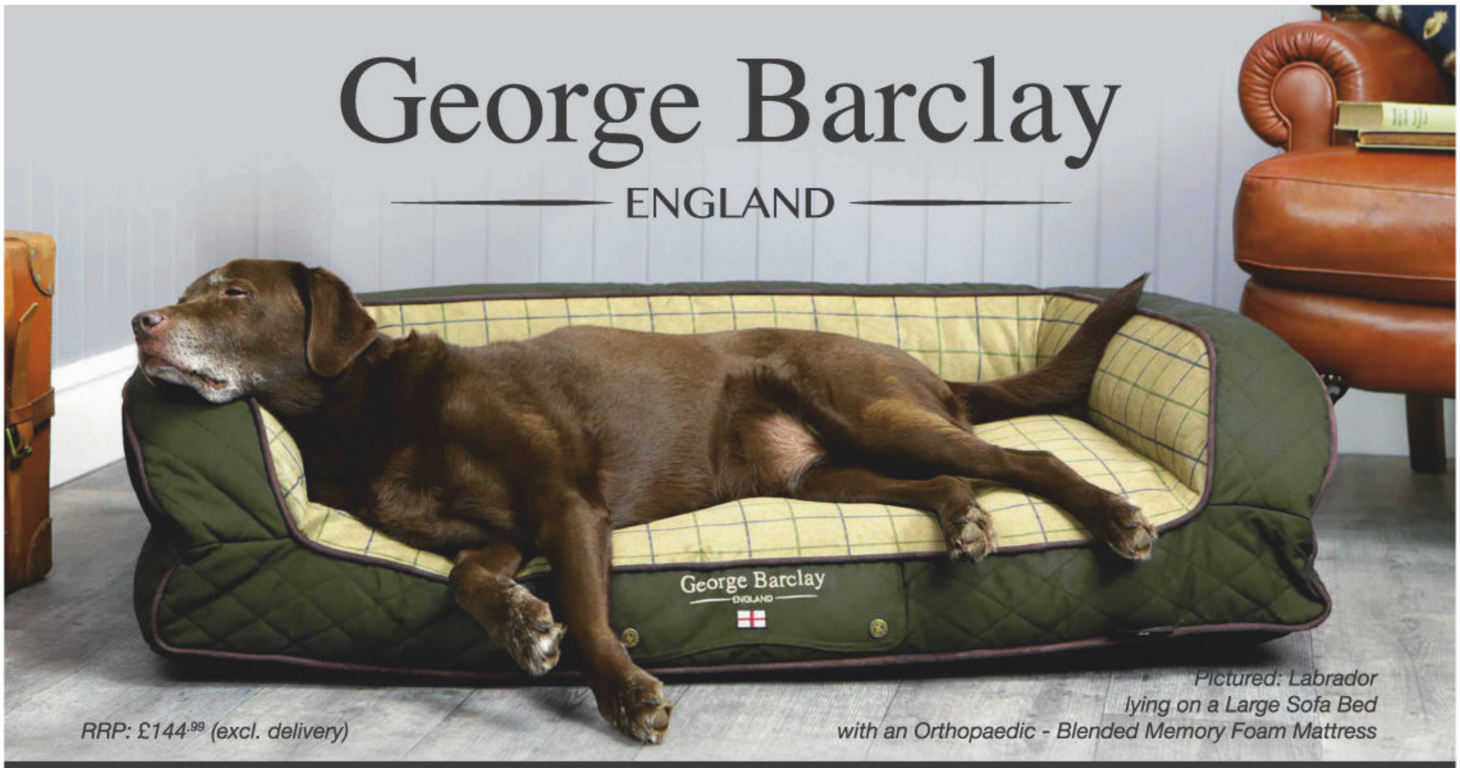

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Hero of the hedgerow

Once a dying craft, hedgelaying is in the throes of a revival. West Country woodsman and tamer of thorn and briar **Paul Lamb** is on a mission to keep centuries-old methods alive

Words: **Margaret Bartlett**

West Country hedgelayer Paul Lamb has spent 30 years practicing his craft and is now passing on the time-honoured skills of the traditional woodsman

Photo: Hamish Beeston

Paul winds hazelwood rods, or binders, between the stakes to make the hedge stable and sturdy

As the song thrushes welcome the dawn, an enamel kettle sings on the stove in the converted horsebox wagon Paul Lamb calls home. It's late February, the annual miracle of spring is about to unfold, and Paul is in a hurry.

"By this time of year, I wouldn't say I'm panicking, but I'm aware the time left in the hedge is limited, and I've got to press on to make sure I get it all done," he explains.

A hedgelayer's labour follows the rhythm of the seasons, beginning when the harvest ends and the birds have flown their nests. "September through till March is non-stop and I'm always chasing my tail a bit, trying to make sure all the contracts are fulfilled and everything is done and dusted, so that once the birds start nesting in March I come out of the hedgerows."

But spending the coldest months of the year working, mostly alone, in bitter winds and driving rain amongst hawthorn, blackthorn and bramble is something Paul fell in love with as a young man – and he's still enamoured.

Paul's traditional skills are now in increasingly high demand – a far cry from the hungry post-war years when British farmers were paid to pull up their hedgerows to make way for industrial-sized machinery. Legislation to protect ancient hedgerows, government subsidies for farmers and an acknowledgement of the importance of our field-edge habitats for wildlife have generated a resurgence in maintaining and planting hedges across the country.

"When I started out 30 years ago, if somebody said you will be able to make your living half of the year laying hedges, I wouldn't have believed them," says Paul. "There just wasn't the demand. Now it's all I can do to keep up with it. But the thing that gives me most heart, if you like, is that there is work coming from multi-generational farming families – people that have a vested interest in the land and continuity of our hedgerows – the future is really with them."

> ***"Thirty years ago, there just wasn't the demand for hedgelaying. Now it's all I can do to keep up with it"***

A LOVE OF THE OUTDOORS

Apart from posting for his large Instagram following (@westcountry_hedgelayer), most trappings of modern life hold little appeal for Paul; his seasonal patterns would be familiar to a rural worker from centuries ago. From autumn through winter he drives his Bedford wagon – complete with woodburner, cosy bed and well-worn armchair – along West Country lanes, parking up in a farmer's yard for the duration of a hedgelaying contract. In spring and summer, he makes hazelwood hurdles and fencing, finds work coppicing or cutting firewood – interspersed with the occasional day off by the river, fishing rod in hand.

Born in Essex, Paul was four when his family emigrated to New Zealand, where the seeds of his outdoor life were sown. "I went out fishing and swimming in the river and down on the

Photos: Hamish Beeston Illustrations: Liam McAuley

> **“Hedgelaying felt like a real connection to the old ways”**

coast with my mates, going up into the bush after school and at weekends and all the rest of it .” The family’s return to England 10 years later was a culture shock for the teenager. “I hated it. It was such a difference, and I couldn’t settle.” But then a visit to his older sister, who had moved to Somerset, proved a revelation. “I thought, hang on, this is more like it. So I left school at 16, got myself a job, saved up as much money as I could and came out to the West Country.”

Just 21 and a new father in search of a more regular income, Paul became an apprentice to woodsman Bill Bugler, a one-man band who sold coppice produce and firewood from a Dorset woodland. He learnt woodland management skills and met the craftsmen who bought Bill’s produce: thatchers, hurdle makers and charcoal burners. Far from the Kiwi bush of his childhood, it was here Paul found the deep connection to the land he was looking for. “These men were amongst the hedgerows; they noticed the changing seasons. They knew what to do at what time of year, and they were part of that ebb and flow of what seemed to me, and still does, the natural order of things.”

But one skill Bill taught him really stood out. “Hedgelaying was just something I fell in love with, really. I was proud of it; it felt like a real connection to the old ways. I really enjoyed it, and still do. Hedgelaying is both sculptural and functional and when carried out correctly, is a work of art in itself.”

Much more than just a living fence to contain livestock, hedgerows create the pleasing patchwork of fields that defines the British countryside and, crucially, act as ecological corridors that provide food, shelter and nesting sites for much of our farmland wildlife, from hedgehogs, invertebrates and bats to dormice and skylarks. One 2015 study counted 2,070 species in an 85-metre stretch of hedge in Devon.

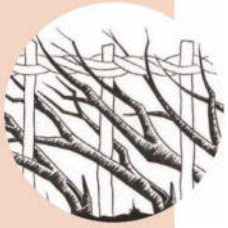
Elegant and durable, the finished hedge won’t need relaying for another 15 to 20 years

HEDGELAYING STYLES

Many different hedgelaying styles have evolved across Britain in response to local terrain, types of livestock and materials, but the principles remain the same.

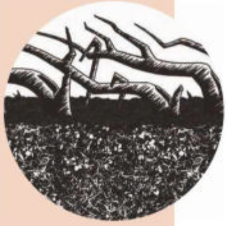
MIDLAND

This design is robust to withstand the weight of cattle pushing against it. Brushy growth is removed from one side before laying the pleachers; stakes are put behind the line of pleached stems and binders are woven around the top of the stakes.



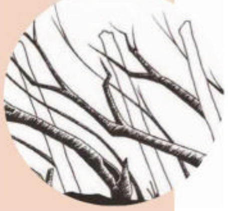
DEVON

Laid on top of an earth bank, the pleachers are laid closer to the ground than usual and pegged down with hazel sticks. Brush is left to grow on one side so the hedge has a half-barrel shape.



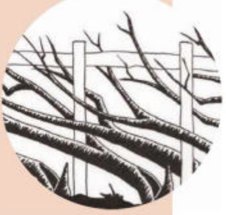
WELSH BORDER

Designed to contain sheep, hazel stakes are driven in on a 35° slant. Dead wood is added to prevent the regrowth being grazed by sheep and binders are woven down the centre line.



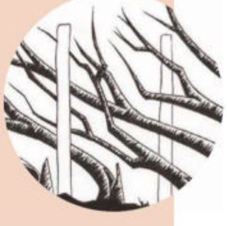
YORKSHIRE

A thin hedge cut close to the ground. Sawn timber is used for stakes and top rail; the top rail is secured to the stakes to hold down the pleachers. It needs to grow before it can contain livestock.



SOUTH OF ENGLAND

Brush is left on both sides, so the finished hedge can be 80–120cm wide. Stakes are placed in a straight line down the middle of the hedge and binders are woven along the top, between the stakes.



Paul uses an axe to pleach a stem at the base, leaving a heel of wood he'll later remove

Straight hazelwood stakes placed at regular intervals bring stability and strength to the hedge

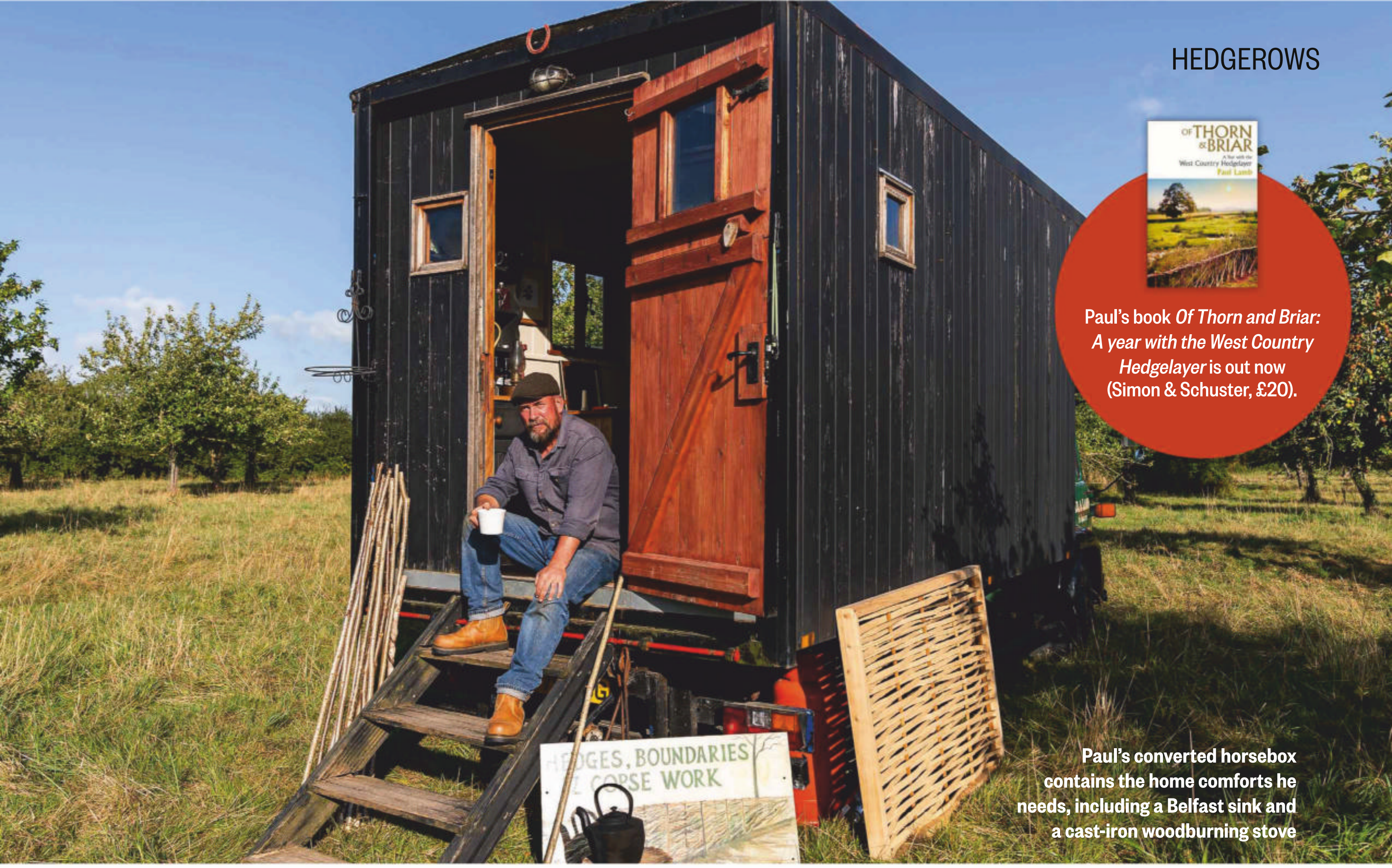
> "One 2015 study counted 2,070 species in an 85-metre stretch of hedge"

Paul drains his cuppa and gathers what he needs for the day: thick leather gloves, chainsaw files, a pruning saw, axe and billhook go in an old canvas satchel alongside a flask of tea and sandwiches. It takes only a few minutes to walk across the fields to today's job, an ageing hedgerow that needs relaying.

HOW TO LAY A HEDGE

"Back in the old days, they would have laid their hedge ideally every 15 or 20 years," explains Paul. "Because of getting all that new growth, you're renewing the hedge with fresh healthy vegetation, then they can just be maintained by trimming in between times." But if a hedge is just trimmed mechanically, rather than maintained by being relaid, the trees – hawthorn, field maple, young oak and blackthorn – grow leggy or die back and the hedge deteriorates. "You will get gaps forming, and things like bramble will get in there. Once there's enough light, the bramble will just take over and smother what remains."

First, Paul cuts out any dead wood, brambles and horizontal branches that won't be needed in the final build using a chainsaw or pruning saw. With an axe or billhook (a long cutting tool), he pleaches each pruned stem at the base; this means cutting it on a diagonal four-fifths through. This makes each stem pliable enough to be bent and laid down at a diagonal, always uphill: "the pleachers rest against each other tidily, like plates in a rack". The regrowth that will thicken up the hedge in the spring comes from these pleaching cuts. Paul removes the heel of wood resulting from the pleaching


OF THORN & BRIAR
A Year with the West Country Hedgelayer
Paul Lamb
HEDGES, BOUNDARIES & COPSE WORK

Paul's book *Of Thorn and Briar: A year with the West Country Hedgelayer* is out now (Simon & Schuster, £20).

Paul's converted horsebox contains the home comforts he needs, including a Belfast sink and a cast-iron woodburning stove

> ***"My hands are beat to pieces and I struggle with a sore back. Trouble is I still price a job like I'm 25!"***

cut with the pruning saw to make sure water doesn't collect and rot the plant.

The next step is to place stout hazel stakes along the hedgeline at even intervals to support and reinforce the laid-over stems, hammering them firmly into the ground. Where in the hedge they are placed depends on the style of hedge (see box, page 59).

Working in the opposite direction to the pleachers, Paul weaves smooth hazel rods – about three or four metres long – between the stakes, locking the hedge firmly together and creating an attractive spiralling pattern. The final touch is to trim and add a point to the stakes to make the height even.

PAYING IT FORWARD

A finished hedge is a thing of beauty that Paul finds joy in, but this is tough work, and still low-paid; as he approaches 50, the decades are taking their toll. "My hands are all beat to pieces and I struggle with a sore back. My trouble is I still look at a job and price it like I'm 25, thinking I'll be done in a couple of days!" Now that he's able to cherry-pick his jobs, he works on the younger hedgerows that are easier to manage and don't need a lot of clearing out first. "If you can lay a hedge without a chainsaw screaming away it's a lovely way to spend a day."

Paul feels a keen responsibility to pass on his skills, but as hedgelaying is priced by the metre and the cost of materials are on the rise, taking on an apprentice isn't financially viable. His solution is running training courses in the autumn, available to all. "In a day you can do an introduction to the craft and show the basic techniques."

His ambition is to inspire a younger generation to reconnect with the countryside. "You know how beneficial that is, not just for the body, but for the mind. With increased technology and screen time and all the rest of it that has led to an epidemic of mental health issues, it's good to be out in the open air, doing physical work. And I think there's an appetite for it again."

After years of a travelling life, Paul is now looking for a more permanent home for his Bedford wagon. He plans to find a plot of land to call his own, a venue for his training courses – teaching coppicing and hazel weaving as well as hedging – and a cosy cottage to house that well-worn armchair. "My hope remains that some will be persuaded, as I was, that a life in the hedgerows, amongst the fields and the woodlands is one of the most rewarding of all."

As the afternoon light fades, Paul packs up his satchel. It's time to head back to the wagon, light the paraffin lamp and get that kettle on the stove. CF

- **To book an Introduction to Hedgelaying course with Paul, go to paulalamb.co.uk**

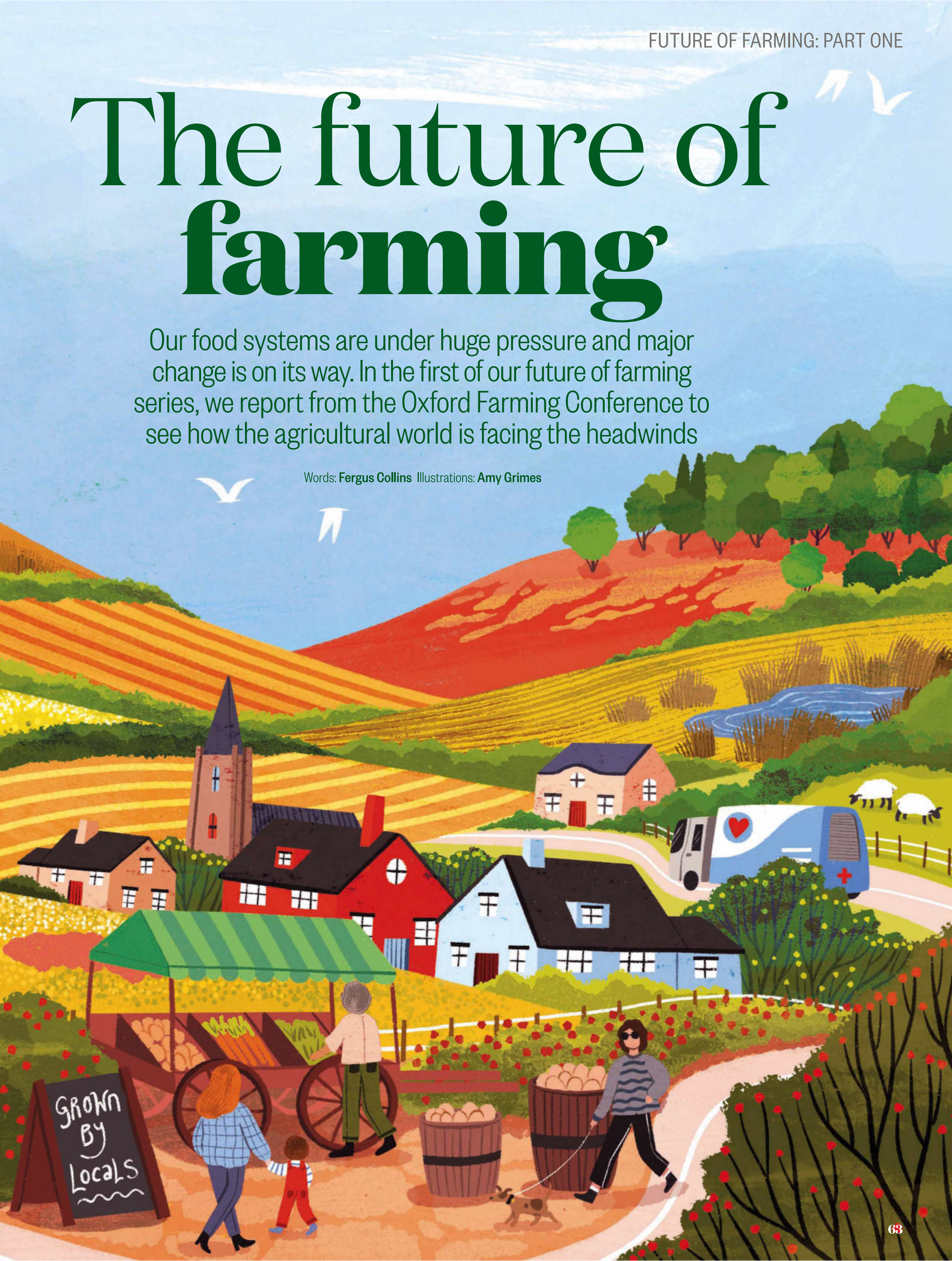
Margaret Bartlett is the production editor on *BBC Countryfile Magazine*. She grew up in New Zealand, with beach and bush always nearby.

Photos: Hamish Beeston

The future of farming

Our food systems are under huge pressure and major change is on its way. In the first of our future of farming series, we report from the Oxford Farming Conference to see how the agricultural world is facing the headwinds

Words: **Fergus Collins** Illustrations: **Amy Grimes**



Held almost every year since 1936, the Oxford Farming Conference (OFC) gathers farmers, economists, policy makers and other experts from within the food-growing community to explore rural issues and give farmers a voice through a series of speeches, debates and workshops. The headline theme this year was 'Facing Change, Finding Opportunity' – a recognition that the future is challenging.

Steve Reed, the secretary of state for environment, food and rural affairs, gave the plenary speech, setting out how the new Labour Government would tackle some of the issues. But there were many other fascinating insights into how the future of farming may be shaped, and not just from within the UK. International efforts offer insight into what we might expect to happen here – from technological advances and new policies to fresh ways of thinking and working. Here are 10 key takeaways from OFC 2025.

FARM GRANTS UNCERTAINTY

The nature and climate crisis is acute in the UK. *State of Nature* reports produced by the major conservation NGOs over recent years reveal that agriculture is a major driver of biodiversity declines and is a significant contributor to carbon emissions.

Many studies have shown that a better integrated health, environment and food strategy can lead to resilient, sustainable and profitable farming that benefits the environment. The UK Government appeared to have recognised this and, as environment secretary Steve Reed outlined in his OFC speech, was using a system of grants to reward and support sustainable food production in England while protecting and enhancing nature. This is called the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI). Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own farming policies.

> "Farmers can generate income from land where crops don't flourish"

Farmers could choose from a range of options, such as creating wildflower mixes, planting hedgerows, improving woodlands, digging ponds and leaving grass buffer strips along watercourses. A big bonus for farmers was that through SFI, they could generate income from marginal land where crops or livestock don't flourish.

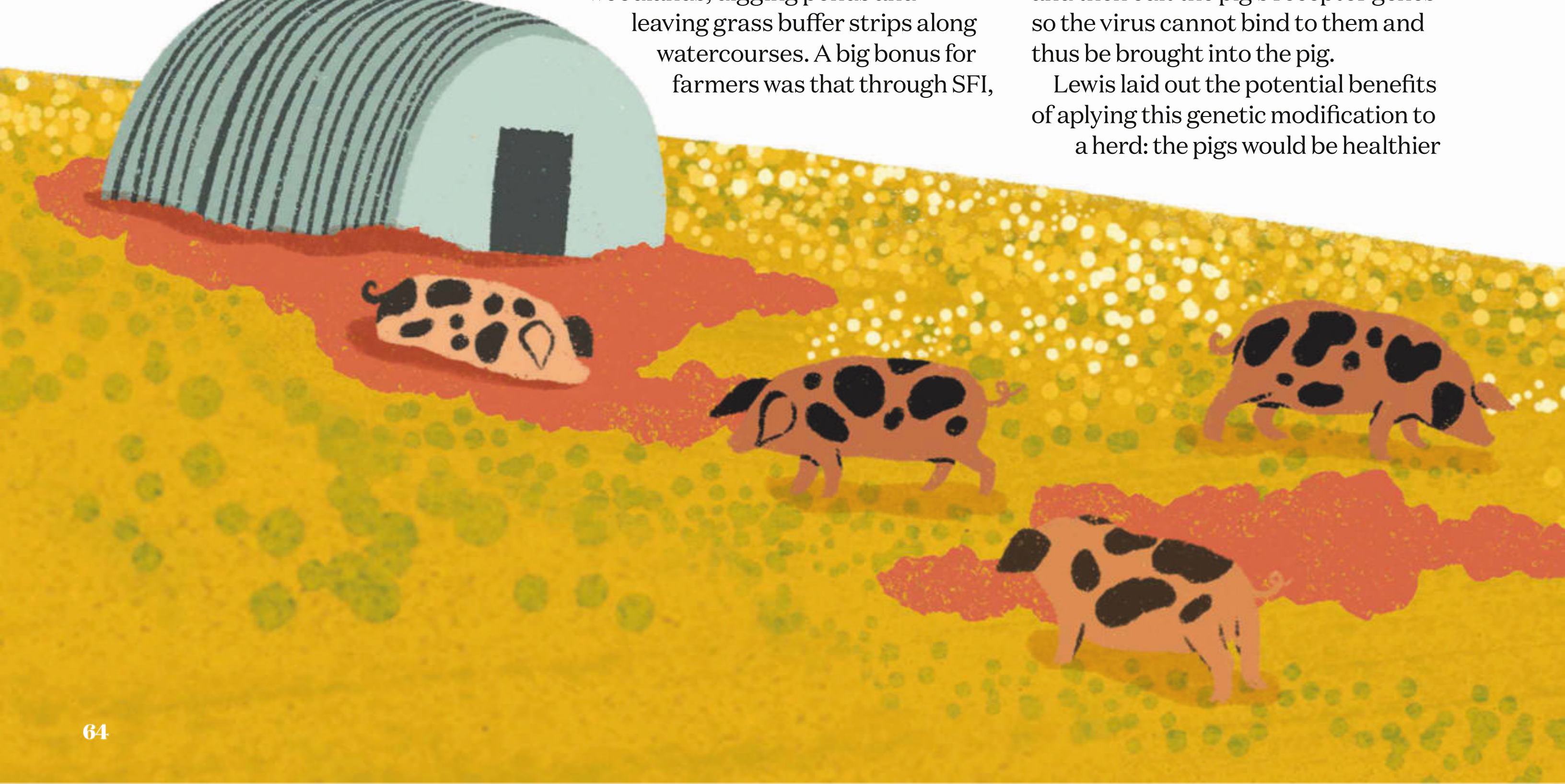
However, despite SFI being the focal point of Reed's speech at the OFC, on 11 March the Government announced that it would no longer be accepting new applications for SFI, leaving the farming and nature-conservation communities in some confusion. Further details are due to be published later in the year. In the meantime, Government policy on nature and sustainable farming is unclear.

AI AND GENETICS REVOLUTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) is playing a major role in genetic science, especially in the development of genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

Craig Lewis from the Pig Improvement Company (PIC) explained how AI technology has tripled the pace of genetic development. This enables scientists to accelerate change and tackle problems in years rather than decades, and it has had a direct application in the pig-farming world. Porcine reproduction and respiratory syndrome (PRRS) is a massive issue, devastating to pig welfare and pork production. Accelerated genetic research has been able to quickly identify resistance to the PRRS virus and then edit the pig's receptor genes so the virus cannot bind to them and thus be brought into the pig.

Lewis laid out the potential benefits of aplying this genetic modification to a herd: the pigs would be healthier



GROWN BY LocaLS

> **“Artificial intelligence has tripled the pace of genetic development”**

and there would be less suffering from disease; there would be less antibiotic use to treat secondary infections that attack animals weakened by the virus; healthier animals grow quicker and reach market sooner, improving profitability; and rural communities, especially pig farmers, would suffer less stress and depression as their herds would be healthier. However, many in the farming and wider community remain strongly opposed to GMO.

ENERGY FROM FARM WASTE

One of the biggest farming issues in Britain concerns pollution from agricultural practices leaching into watercourses and other habitats. But could this energy-rich waste – especially animal slurry and dung – be processed and turned into green energy? Ian Marshall at Queen’s University Belfast’s Institute of Global Food Security (IGFS) is optimistic.

In Northern Ireland, Marshall is exploring the use of a new wave of anaerobic digesters which process slurry solids and chicken manure to produce biogas, heat and electricity. What is currently considered a costly by-product that too often finds its way into rivers could now have a commercial value. Marshall points to a growing fleet of trucks and agricultural vehicles in Northern Ireland already powered by biofuels from waste, reducing the need for costly, polluting diesel.

INNOVATE TO FEED THE WORLD

After falling for many years, global hunger has been on the rise since 2017. Much of this is linked to climate change, which has caused crop failures and food shortages in many parts of the world. CIMMYT is an international non-profit organisation dedicated to “solving tomorrow’s problems today”. One area CIMMYT specialises in is breeding crops that will be resistant to the extreme temperatures and pathogens that are expected within the near future due to climate change. Dr Bram Govaerts, speaking on behalf of CIMMYT, explained that heat-resistant crops will be needed in the UK within the next 25 years. Sobering news.

In a secure vault in Mexico, CIMMYT holds 124,000 samples of wheat varieties and 28,000 maize varieties. It uses these as the basis for developing resilient traits for the crops of the future to help increase yields and safeguard global food supplies.

BUILD LINKS WITH CONSUMERS

The UK’s modern food system breaks communities: this was the message from a panel discussion about ‘food connectivity’. The panel comprised food poverty campaigner Dominic Watters, Dee Woods from the Food Ethics Council and Nick Saltmarsh from Hodmedods Wholefoods, which champions fair and sustainable growing of pulses, seeds and grains.

The panel identified that the modern food system markets food to people but does not seek to feed them. It also depersonalises and reduces the importance of the food producer.

The panel called for more connection between farmers and local people, and a greater understanding and sympathy for poorer communities who have little access to quality food. Greater emphasis should be placed on teaching an understanding of food and cooking skills. And a simple measure such as putting the name and photograph of a farmer or food producer on packaging could start to rebuild connections and empower growers and consumers.

LESSONS FROM DENMARK

Climate change was a persistent theme at the Oxford Farming Conference, with increasing calls from many quarters for more direction and more action to cope with change. So it was fascinating to hear from Denmark where what’s been described as a green revolution is taking place. Could the UK, which has a far greater land area and population, follow a similar path?

Lisbeth Henricksen, executive director of Seges Innovation, a research company specialising in sustainable agriculture, outlined

“Agriculture is responsible for 12% of the UK’s carbon emissions”

some of the changes. About £5 billion worth of green investment is helping to get things started, and 2,500 hectares of new woodlands are being created.

Taxes are being introduced on livestock carbon emissions and there will be tax breaks for farmers instigating climate mitigation measures. In Henricksen’s words “high-emission production will be removed”. The wider plan is to make the most of top quality land for farming and turn marginal land over to nature.

FRESH FARMING METHODS

Few people understand the climate-related issues facing the UK better than Professor Piers Forster, chair of the Climate Change Committee. It is the committee’s job to advise all four UK governments – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – on how to reach Net Zero, where carbon emissions are reduced to such a small level that any remaining emissions can be easily captured and stored. Agriculture is responsible for 12% of UK carbon emissions so, says Professor Forster, it has a major role to play. He identified several key areas, including improved livestock systems and animal health, especially grazing on a mix of native grasses and legumes which helps capture carbon and reduce emissions. Tree planting and peat bog restoration are also vital; he also highlighted the need to focus on renewable energy and energy crops.

The key to all of this is education, with Professor Forster arguing that farmers need to be taught fresh ways of managing land, soil and livestock.

IMPROVE THE NATION’S DIET

Poor diet is a major cause of ill-health in the UK, with links to rising levels of Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, obesity, 13 types of cancer and declining mental health. Anna Taylor, executive director of the charity The Food Foundation, explained how ultra-processed foods are at the heart of the problem: they lack nutrients but are dangerously high in sugar, fat and salt. Even plastic packaging is hazardous as it leaches chemicals into the food. She called for “the potential of British produce to be unlocked” – that means more quality fruit and vegetables in our diets.

Taylor’s vision includes a national fruit and vegetable strategy integrating health, environment and farming – and beginning with public procurement. This would mean national governments and councils would source local, quality fruit and vegetables for schools, hospitals and prisons, driving demand and encouraging farmers and suppliers to change their practices.

Taylor also wants to see better marketing of fruit and vegetables through campaigns such as the very effective ‘Eat them to defeat them’ adverts that encourage children to eat more veg. She also suggested supermarkets should make their fruit and vegetable aisles more appealing.

> “Councils would source local, quality fruit for schools, prisons and hospitals”

ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH

With increasing mechanisation, most farms employ just one person permanently: the farmer. Add in the challenges of weather, crop failures and exhausting physical demands – as well as the need to balance books – and it’s easy to see why farming is one of the loneliest, most stressful jobs there is. A survey carried about by farming charity RABI in 2021 found that 36% of farmers were suffering from depression.

After her husband took his own life in 2016, Emma Picton-Jones understood that more needed to be done to reach out to the farming community, which has often found it difficult to talk about mental health. That same year, Emma set up The DPJ Foundation to offer farmers 24-hour access to counselling. Since then her foundation has helped 1,185 people from ages 7–91. The foundation also has a health lorry that visits livestock markets to give farmers a health check. Of the 1,220 farmers who have taken part so far, 252 were referred straight to a GP and several immediately to hospital.

DIVERSITY BOOSTS SUCCESS

Diversity was a key theme at OFC 2025. Like many forward-thinking businesses, the agricultural sector is recognising that diverse voices and cultures offer fresh perspectives that can have a major positive impact on the success of an organisation. What might once have been dismissed as ‘woke’ is now becoming mainstream.

Liz Haines is a farmer who has been granted a Nuffield Scholarship to investigate how to bring people from non-farming backgrounds into the industry; she is keen to raise awareness around neurodiversity and to improve job opportunities in agriculture.

Diagnosed with ADHD herself, Haines says neurodiversity helps with business success and believes it is a natural condition and not something that needs to be medically treated. Instead, she argues that businesses should actively recruit autistic and dyslexic people because they bring new problem-solving skills and alternative ways of thinking that are needed in these challenging times. CF

Fergus Collins is the creator and host of *BBC Countryfile Magazine’s* award-winning Plodcast and a freelance writer and editor. He lives in Abergavenny, Wales.

Passing cityscapes, the Avon Gorge and industrial Avonmouth, the Severn Beach line is one of the UK's most varied rail routes

Riding the rails

In his latest book, **Nige Tassell** travelled to the end of the line on 16 routes across Britain, discovering just how vital our railways still are to locals and tourists alike. And all without a single delay...

Photos: **Steve Sayers; Alamy**

Who doesn't love a long-distance train journey? Agatha Christie did. "To travel by train," she once observed, "is to see nature and human beings, towns and churches and rivers – in fact, to see life." A.A. Milne was another fan. A railway carriage is "the ideal place in which to think," he declared, "the ideal place in which to be happy".

That's always been the appeal of train travel for me, too – especially stretched-out, unhurried long-distance journeys where the eye needn't pay attention to the clock and instead can leisurely take in the world just outside the window. Letting the train take the strain gives you the time and space to consider and cogitate. And it offers you a fresh perspective on the countryside – from a different angle and at close quarters – with widescreen vista after widescreen vista. Train travel bisects the landscape, giving you a front-row seat. It truly is the king of all transport.

With the calendar turning on a new year and a working life that saw me becoming a permanent fixture at the kitchen table, I needed that fresh perspective. So I devised a plan: I would travel on a variety of railway lines, riding every mile from point of departure to final destination, staying on board until each train reached the buffers. I would be the last man sitting. Then I'd have a good old-fashioned nose-around wherever it was that we'd terminated. Often it was a place I would never have expected or needed to visit. It might be a disused ferry port. Or a seaside resort being reclaimed by the waves. Or a well-turned-out spa town high up in the hills. These places all had one thing in common: they could all be found at the end of the line.

Stretched over a four-month period, my itinerary consisted of 16 journeys in England, Scotland and Wales. Wick – the closest station to John o' Groats – was my first port of call and Penzance, as near to Land's End as the steel highway reaches, was the last station stop. Now completed, these 16 adventures have been shunted together into a new book – *Final Destination: Riding Britain's Trains to the End of the Line.*

BACK OF BEYOND

That first journey, from Inverness to Wick in Scotland, a four-and-a-half-hour push both along coastline and across uninhabited interior, was confirmation of the power of train travel. One of the most notable stretches of this, the evocatively named Far North Line, is through

The 40-minute Severn Beach line from Bristol Temple Meads crosses the River Trym at Sea Mills

A hot cuppa after some superlative scrambled eggs at Shirley's in Severn Beach

the Flow Country, an enormous expanse of blanket bog which now boasts UNESCO World Heritage status. In the worst kind of weather, it's probably among the bleakest places in the British Isles. Indeed, without this two-carriage service rumbling across its soggy terrain, only the most intrepid of hikers would take in this otherwise hidden landscape, a place of dark secrets lost underneath its peaty ways.

And it is seriously remote. One of the stations on the Far North Line is seven miles from the nearest paved road and 11 miles from the nearest village. Wick itself is 140 miles closer to the city of Bergen in Norway than it is to London.

None of the other 15 journeys took me so far past the back of beyond, but each one offered a unique view of the British landscape as it moved past my window. The vista might be of the mountains of Eryri (Snowdonia), the marshlands of Essex, the high peaks of Derbyshire or the seascapes of Devon and Cornwall, but each time I found myself ruminating on the beauty and majesty of these isles. In the Scottish Highlands, a herd of stags regarded our train as it trespassed on their home turf. Riding on the edge of a cliff on the west Wales coast, I watched gulls launch themselves off the rocks below the track, my eyes riding on their wings.

> ***"Train travel is truly the king of all transport"***

CAFÉ CULTURE

No matter how small and sparsely populated the final destination – such as the village of Severn Beach under the shadow of the bridge formerly known as the Second Severn Crossing, or the pebble-and-kelp desert of Dungeness in Kent – there was always a welcome café at journey's end. A lengthy menu was always hungrily scrutinised after hours of only being sustained by the on-board refreshments trolley – if, indeed, there even was one. Sadly, there was no

“All change, please.” Nige’s rail quest took four months and covered 2,770 miles of track

Agatha Christie-style dining car on any of these routes, aside from the buffet on the sleeper train down to Penzance, serving little more than complimentary hot chocolate nightcaps to those passengers who’d forked out for a cabin.

An unhurried time spent in a café is a pleasure that ranks pretty close to leisurely train travel, and several such establishments served up meals that will linger long in the memory. The fried-egg roll at the Jac-o-Bites Café in Mallaig was transcendental, so much so that I ordered another one immediately after. Then there was the heavenly chip stottie and mushy-pea fritter in South Shields, teacakes in the old station buffet in Sheringham, the freshest-tasting egg mayonnaise sandwich in history in Pwllheli…

Other meals were memorable for the wrong reasons. In Wick, I was served a ‘house salad’ that consisted of three brown leaves of iceberg lettuce which appeared to have been retrieved from the nearest compost bin.

Cafés are not only of value for the food they serve the traveller otherwise reliant on a train’s refreshments trolley, but also for the wisdom of their clientele. With no need to hurry for my return train, I would often linger in a corner seat, getting the measure of the town or village from the conversations of its regulars, from their concerns and observations. I tuned into, and spoke with, locals and visitors alike, hearing about everything from the government of the day to gymnastics classes, from the effects of tourism to last night’s football results. Patch all those conversations together from these various outposts and you get some kind of barometer reading of the nation as a whole.

THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS

I also tuned into, and spoke with, plenty of passengers on board those trains, whether they were travelling for business or pleasure. If you want it, riding the rails puts you in the glorious company of strangers in a way that car travel simply can’t. I was people-watching too, my eyes and ears always wide open. Commuters, students, families, tourists, rail fanatics… all

LAST MAN SITTING

Three of Nige’s favourite end-of-the-line journeys, from Highland blockbuster to hidden gem

THE WEST HIGHLAND LINE

An obvious choice – and a popular line thanks to its use of the magnificent Glenfinnan Viaduct in the *Harry Potter* films – but this five-and-a-half-hour ride from Glasgow to Mallaig deserves all the plaudits it gets. Through mountain ranges, across moorland and alongside lochs, there is a new awesome view around each and every corner.

THE ESK VALLEY LINE

An absolute hidden gem, the Esk Valley Line curls its way through the North Yorkshire landscape between Middlesbrough and Whitby, stopping only in small villages and hamlets. As such, it’s kind of timeless, with very few vestiges of modern life visible from the window as the train crosses the River Esk a full 18 times before its arrival in Whitby.

THE CAMBRIAN LINE

Another line that must be on the bucket list of any self-respecting train traveller. Start in Shrewsbury and head across the magnificent hills of Shropshire and mid-Wales before the line takes you north, hugging the golden coastline, through Eryri (Snowdonia) and all the way to the Llŷn Peninsula. The pretty seaside town of Pwllheli is your final destination.

Photos: Alamy

FINAL DESTINATION
NIGE TASSELL

Once a resort dubbed 'the Blackpool of the West', Severn Beach is now home to the Prince of Wales Bridge

Final Destination: Riding Britain's Trains to the End of the Line is published by Mudlark/HarperCollins.

> **"These joyous journeys must never become ghost lines"**

human life could be found in every single carriage.

Some of the shorter journeys – for instance, the packed Metro train between Newcastle Airport and South Shields – were largely the preserve of those wanting to get from A to B as quickly as possible. No-one was dreamily gazing out of the window. These trains' human cargo uniformly stared down at their phones. Everyone was firmly in the modern world, in the here and now.

Elsewhere, especially where journeys traversed remote areas, modern life barely got a look-in. Instead, we passengers had the time and space to consider the permanence and majesty of Britain's geography. This might be the looming peaks surrounding the haul up to Buxton, the eternal, unstopping tides of the North Wales coast or the endless miles of immaculate drystone walling stitching together the rolling fields of the Forest of Boland in Lancashire. The stresses, strains and irritations of everyday living could be jettisoned, forgotten. Here was a reminder of what really matters in life. The big stuff, not the transient annoyances. Politicians come and go, celebrities rise and fall, but here, on the way to those final destinations, things stayed reassuringly the same.

FARE'S FAIR

When I recently told someone about the book, they drew a sharp intake of breath. "Bet that cost a fortune in train fares." But, yes, while commuters justifiably protest about rising season-ticket prices, especially when combined with the declining quality of service on many lines, these 16 trips far from broke the bank. In fact, one of my favourites – the 90-minute ride on the gorgeous Esk Valley Line – cost me just £2.90. (Of course, were I in possession of one of the many railcards available, I could have taken a third off that ticket price too.) And, genuinely, aside from a single enforced rail-replacement bus, not one train ran even a minute late.

That these lines, often heading to distant outposts, exist and continue to thrive is vital for both local residents and inquisitive visitors. They should be treasured and valued. Use them or lose them. If it's the latter, these joyous journeys will be extinguished forever, secrets never to be revealed to future generations of rail passengers. This cannot happen. They must never become ghost lines. Dr Richard Beeching's report of 1963 – which announced the mothballing of 30% of the country's rail lines and the closure of 55% of stations – marked the darkest day in the history of British railways, decimating rural train provision. History cannot repeat itself.

Of course, had Dr Beeching not taken his scythe to the network, I would have had a great many more lines and final destinations to consider for my itinerary. Still, none of the 16 trains that I did step on board remotely disappointed. No matter how lengthy some of these journeys were, it was always sad to hear the train manager's words as we slowed up towards the buffers. "All change, please. All change."

The final time I heard those words, as the overnight sleeper slid into breakfast-time Penzance, signalled that all those journeys were at an end. The quest was over. Across the previous four months, I had seen nature and human beings and towns and churches and rivers. I had seen life. I had enjoyed plenty of thinking time. And I was happy. Agatha and A.A. would surely have approved. CF

Nige Tassell is a journalist and author who writes about popular culture, travel and sport.

STUNNING
SPRING BREAKS

The bees are buzzing and the buds are blooming. Take a look at these ideas to help you grab a stunning spring break and make the most of the British countryside

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BURNBAKE LODGES AND CAMPSITE

Tucked in Dorset's Purbeck region on the Jurassic Coast, Burnbake offers the perfect getaway for families, adventurers, wildlife lovers, and history buffs. Enjoy camping, glamping Safari Tents, luxury forest lodges with private hot tubs, and a farmhouse to rent. Surrounded by stunning countryside, dramatic coastline, and local landmarks, it's time for your Burnbake adventure.

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Darwin Forest is an award-winning lodge holiday park in the Derbyshire Peak District. It combines luxury accommodation with fantastic facilities, all located in a tranquil forest setting. It is the perfect place to stay for visiting local attractions such as Chatsworth House or as a base for exploring the miles of picturesque Derbyshire footpaths. It is pet-friendly too.

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LAKE DISTRICT ESTATES

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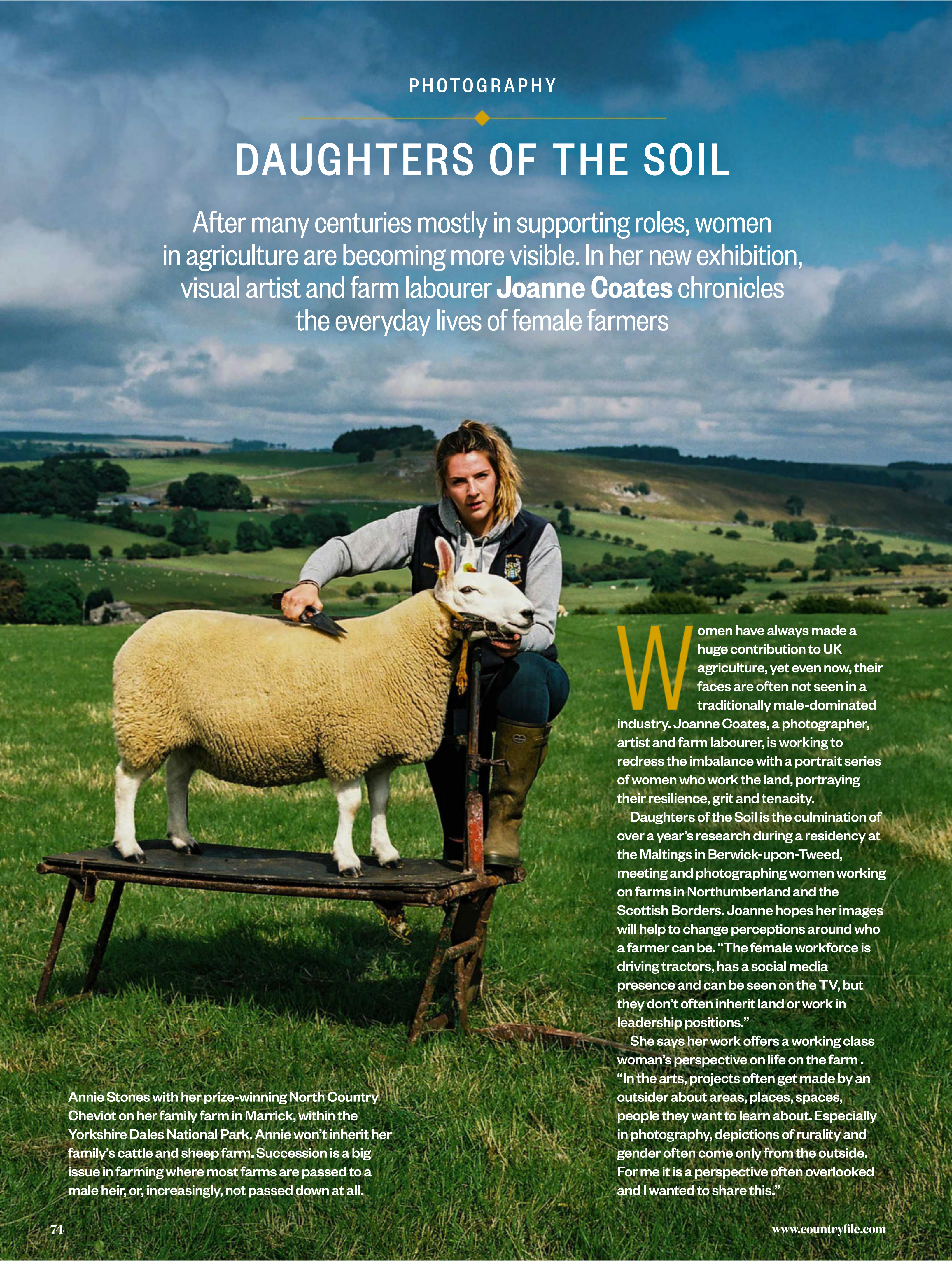
PHOTOGRAPHY

DAUGHTERS OF THE SOIL

After many centuries mostly in supporting roles, women in agriculture are becoming more visible. In her new exhibition, visual artist and farm labourer **Joanne Coates** chronicles the everyday lives of female farmers



Annie Stones with her prize-winning North Country Cheviot on her family farm in Marrick, within the Yorkshire Dales National Park. Annie won't inherit her family's cattle and sheep farm. Succession is a big issue in farming where most farms are passed to a male heir, or, increasingly, not passed down at all.

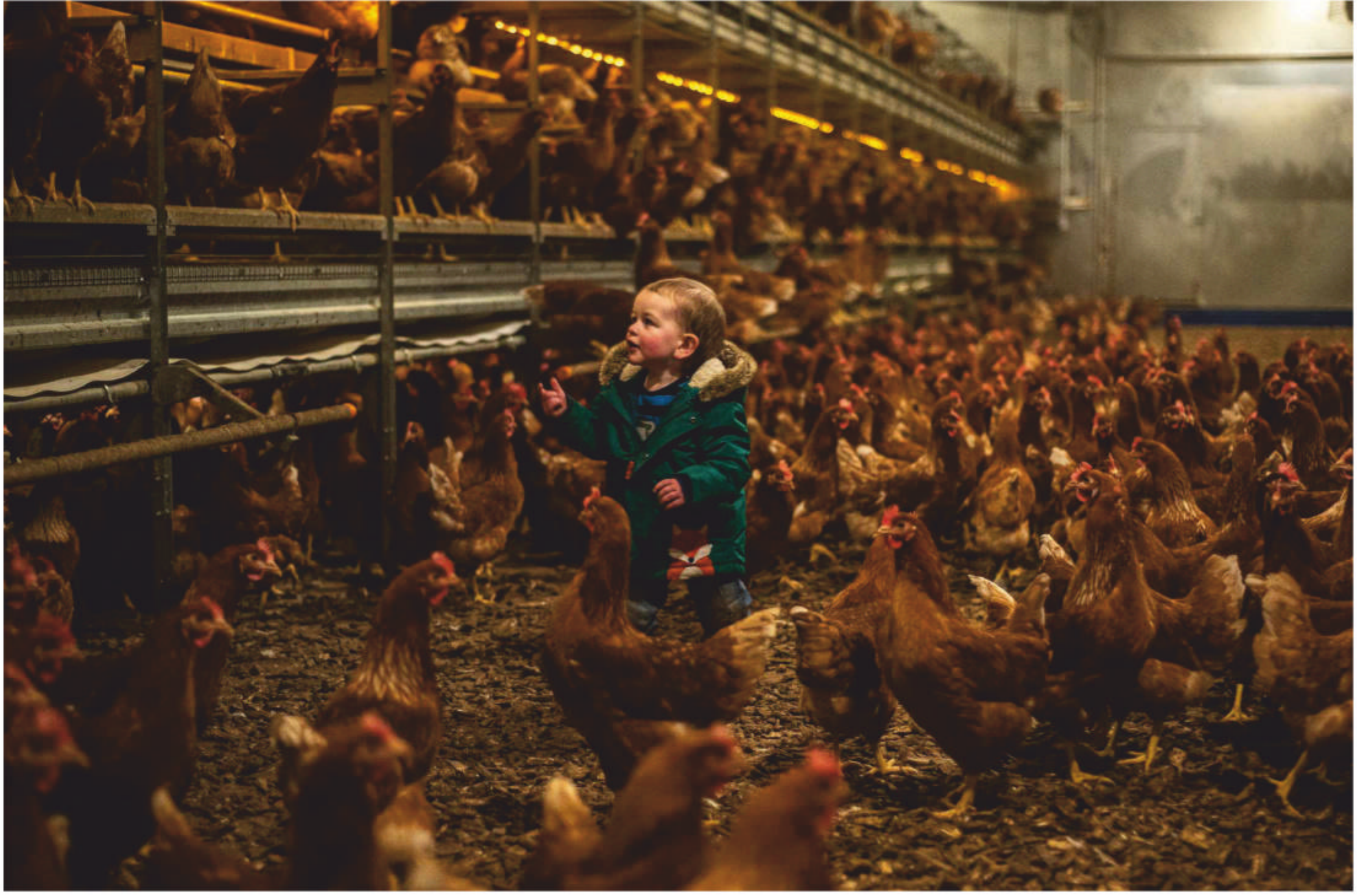
Women have always made a huge contribution to UK agriculture, yet even now, their faces are often not seen in a traditionally male-dominated industry. Joanne Coates, a photographer, artist and farm labourer, is working to redress the imbalance with a portrait series of women who work the land, portraying their resilience, grit and tenacity.

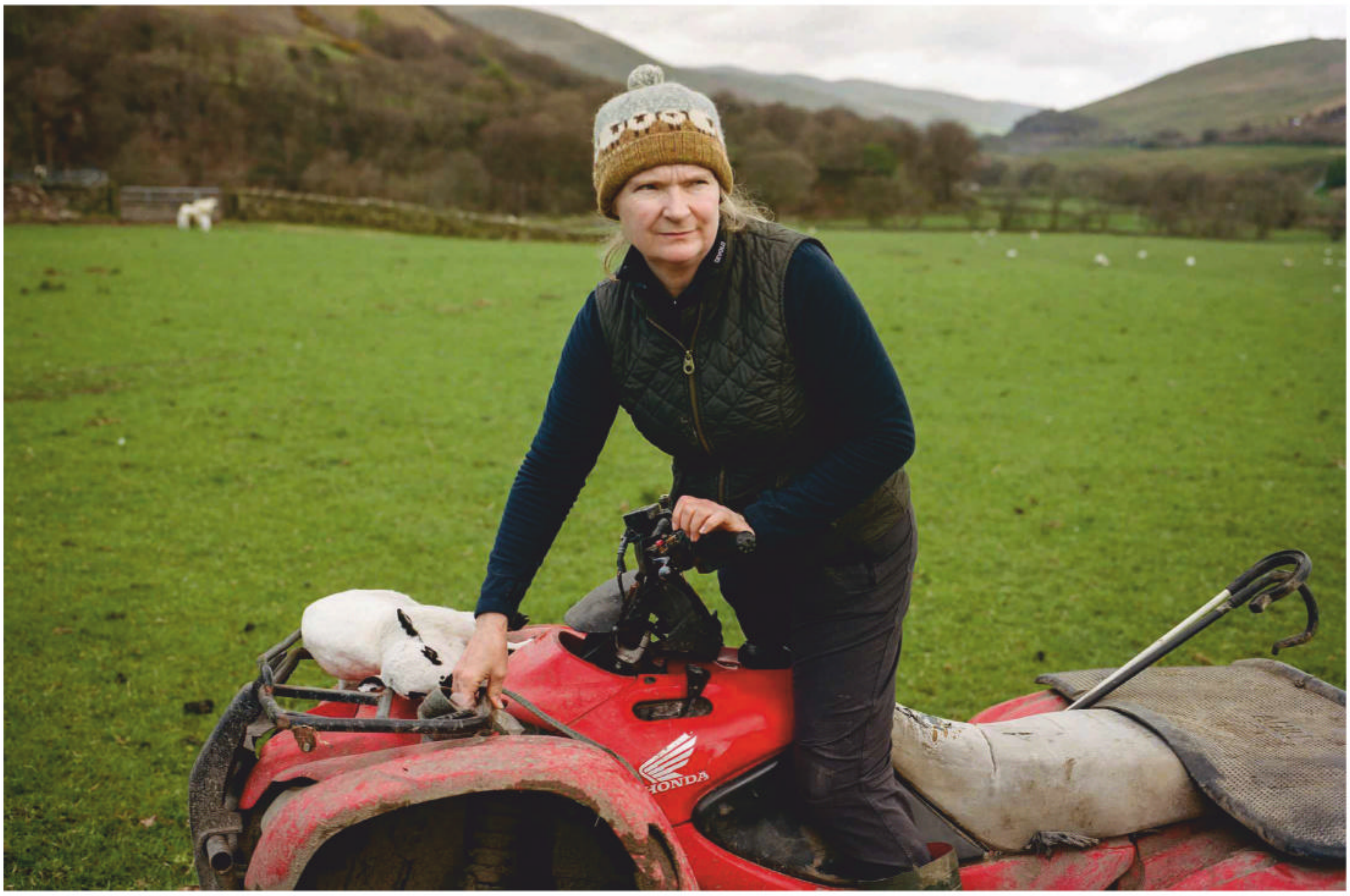
Daughters of the Soil is the culmination of over a year's research during a residency at the Maltings in Berwick-upon-Tweed, meeting and photographing women working on farms in Northumberland and the Scottish Borders. Joanne hopes her images will help to change perceptions around who a farmer can be. "The female workforce is driving tractors, has a social media presence and can be seen on the TV, but they don't often inherit land or work in leadership positions."

She says her work offers a working class woman's perspective on life on the farm . "In the arts, projects often get made by an outsider about areas, places, spaces, people they want to learn about. Especially in photography, depictions of rurality and gender often come only from the outside. For me it is a perspective often overlooked and I wanted to share this."

Fransje Samson Tinkelenberg lays out a fleece to remove sticks or straw. Fransje owns a smallholding in Northumberland with her husband Peter, who she met when working on a farm in the Netherlands. She also works as an occupational therapist.

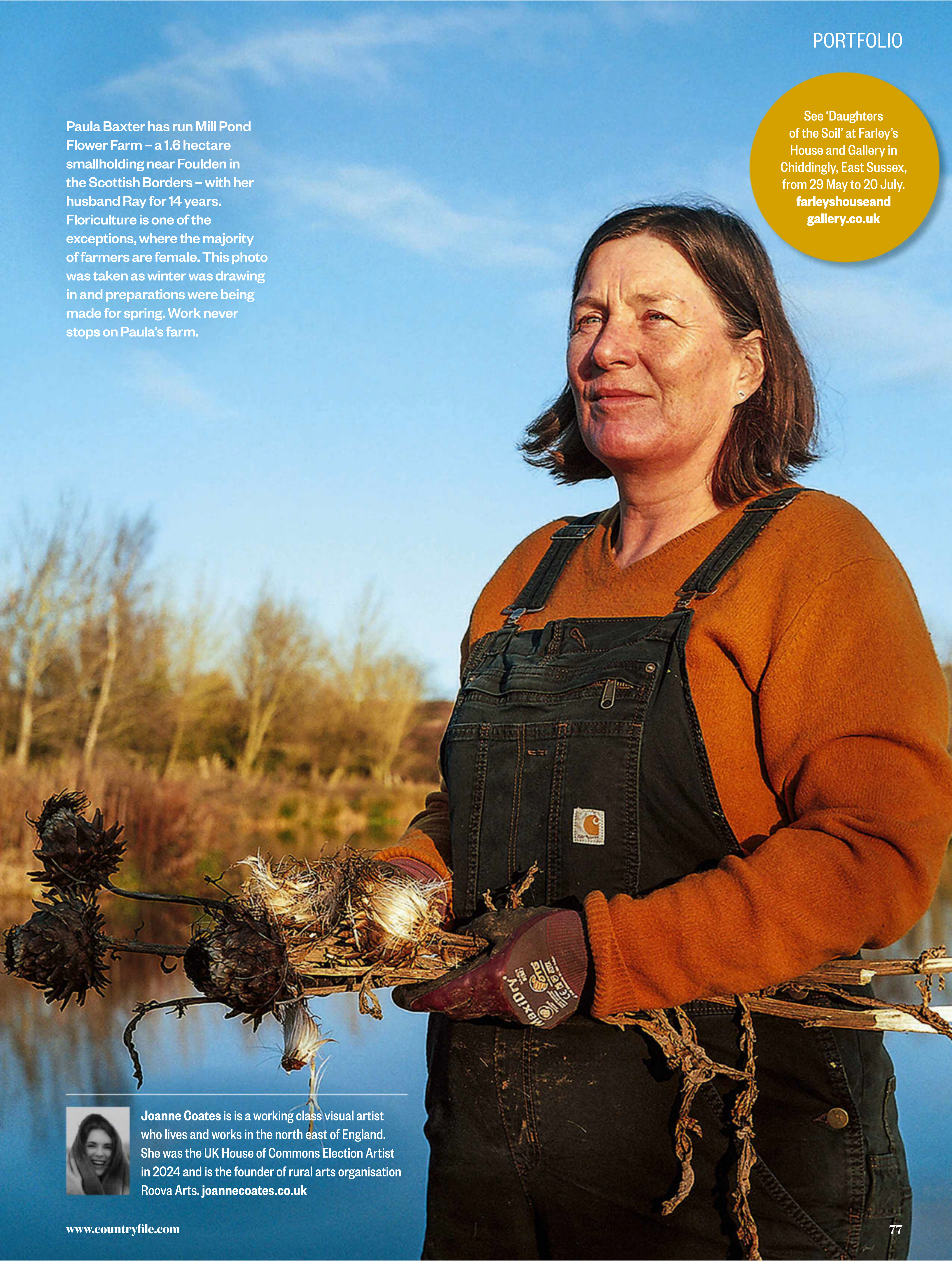
Poppy Izat is a vet and farmer's daughter. Each summer she helps her dad with the harvest by driving the combine harvester on the farm. Poppy is passionate about how entwined farmers are with the land they cultivate.





Angela MacLean has her own organic egg company, MacLean Eggs. She works with her husband James who runs Border Eggs and she helps run the family farm shop. Her young son Fraser often works with her, seen here in the chicken shed.

Andrea Meanwell during lambing season in Westmorland, Yorkshire Dales. A dead lamb is draped on top of the quad bike – a difficult part of the season. The relentless toil at this time of year makes the animal losses feel even worse.



Paula Baxter has run Mill Pond Flower Farm – a 1.6 hectare smallholding near Foulden in the Scottish Borders – with her husband Ray for 14 years. Floriculture is one of the exceptions, where the majority of farmers are female. This photo was taken as winter was drawing in and preparations were being made for spring. Work never stops on Paula's farm.

See 'Daughters of the Soil' at Farley's House and Gallery in Chiddingly, East Sussex, from 29 May to 20 July. **farleyshouseandgallery.co.uk**

Joanne Coates is is a working class visual artist who lives and works in the north east of England. She was the UK House of Commons Election Artist in 2024 and is the founder of rural arts organisation Roova Arts. **joannecoates.co.uk**

Q&A The big questions answered

Farmers' markets are great places to shop for quality sourdough loaves

Need an answer? Send your questions to **editor@countryfile.com**

1 What's the difference between white, brown and sourdough bread?

"Without bread, all is misery," wrote social reformer William Cobbett (1763–1835) in his 1821 book *Cottage Economy*, where he extolled breadmaking and bemoaned the rise of the potato, which he felt threatened his beloved foodstuff. Fears about bread, how it's made and what goes into it have never gone away – and that's because it's such a daily staple in almost every British household.

The two most commonly encountered loaves come in the form of white and brown bread. White bread is made from wheat flour where the grain's outer husk, known as bran, is removed prior to milling, leaving just white flour as the base material. Brown bread includes the bran in the milling process, hence the name 'wholegrain' and may also incorporate rye flour from rye berries, a cereal related to wheat and barley. Some brown loaves include wholegrains and malted wheat flakes to give texture and flavour. This is commonly called granary bread. Because of these wholegrains, brown bread generally contains more health-giving fibre, minerals and vitamins than white bread. But the sheer joy of a crusty white loaf often overrides nutritional concerns.

Traditional breadmaking involves mixing flour with water and yeast (the rising or 'leavening' agent) and then kneading it with palms and knuckles to break down the gluten in the wheat, creating an elastic dough. The dough is left in a warm place to 'prove' or rise. The yeast, a living organism, feeds on the sugars in the dough starch and emits carbon dioxide, which forms pockets of gas – air bubbles – giving the loaf its shape and fluffy texture. The action of the yeast also produces alcohol, which provides extra flavour. Once the dough has 'risen' sufficiently, which can take hours or even days, it can be baked.

> "Fermentation gives sourdough its characteristic tangy flavour and chewiness"

Sourdough uses a fermented mix of flour and water known as a 'starter' as the leavening agent rather than yeast. It takes several days to create a starter and it needs regular 'feeding' with flour to keep the fermentation process going. It is this fermentation that gives sourdough bread its characteristic tangy flavour and chewiness.

MODERN MANUFACTURING

In 1961, the world of commercial bread baking was turned on its head with the development of the Chorleywood Process. Developed at the Chorleywood Flour Milling and Bakery Research Association laboratories in Hertfordshire, the process involves the use of extra yeast, hard fat and certain chemicals. Mixing it all up at high speed, the scientists could accelerate the leavening process and create a cheap, uniform, light and fluffy loaf that stayed fresh

Photos: Alamy

In 1949, the Duchess of Kent opened the British Baking Industries Research Association, where the Chorleywood Process was developed in the 1960s

longer. It also meant bread could be made from low-protein flour from British wheat instead of expensive imports from North America. This was an instant win for manufacturers and British farming – and offered cheap bread for consumers.

Now, almost all supermarket and bakery-chain bread is made using the Chorleywood Process. But is sliced bread the best thing since... what we ate before? The Real Bread Campaign (RBC) and many nutritionists claim the accelerated process involves excessive levels of yeast while the gluten does not break down sufficiently, leaving 'unripe bread' that may be less digestible, causing the rise in gluten intolerance. Critics also voice fears about the chemicals and additives used, as well as the lack of nutritional value in the final loaves. However, there is no clear proof that the additives are harmful or that there is a link between Chorleywood-Process bread and gluten intolerance. But what is inarguable is that bread that has longer dough-fermentation times, especially sourdough, has a richer and more complex flavour than bread produced using industrial techniques.

In addition, the cheapness of modern bread could also be a problem. Recycling and waste disposal company Waste Managed reports 900,000 tonnes of bread are thrown away each year in the UK, equal to 24 million slices of bread a day. Could it be that, through being so inexpensive for many households, modern sliced bread is considered disposable?

One way to ensure you know exactly what is going into your bread is to make it yourself. It's a simple and hugely satisfying process where you can experiment with flour combinations and flavours as much as you wish. Some may claim it is time consuming but, beyond 15 minutes of mixing and kneading the ingredients, almost all the subsequent work is done by the yeast and dough while you can get on with other tasks. And the end result is fresher and more delicious than almost anything you can buy commercially. **Fergus Collins**

Rye times

A staple of European breakfast buffets, rye bread is made from rye flour and is higher in fibre, protein and B vitamins than its wheat equivalent.

2 How do I find the right dog for me?

Perhaps you're planning a move to the country this year – the perfect opportunity to become a dog owner. Or maybe you've always wanted a dog to take on weekend walks in the countryside but are not sure about the first steps. Either way, if you want to buy a dog, your choice of breed could be crucial. Some breeds will suit your lifestyle perfectly, but the wrong dog will lead to stress and unhappiness – for both of you.

Owning a dog can change your life for the better. Dogs give you a reason to go outside every day for fresh air and exercise, they bring a whole new dimension to exploring the countryside as they enjoy the space and freedom, and they will regularly bring you into contact with others of a like mind. And there's nothing quite like the companionship that a faithful dog can bring.

All this only becomes possible if you have chosen the right breed for you and trained your dog wisely. To avoid problems, such as your dog running away, chasing or pulling incessantly on the lead, you need to find the right breed that suits your household, and also sign up for good quality training.

Get the family together to make a list of all the characteristics you want from a new dog. Think about its exercise needs, personality, size, and attitude to visitors and other dogs. Include what you can offer the dog. Be realistic: how much free time does each member of the family really have? Who will do the feeding, walking, playing, taking to the vet

Daily costs

Before committing, work out how much it will cost to keep a new dog, including food, insurance and vet fees. Try the pet cost calculator at rspca.org.uk.

Puppies start eating solid food at around three or four weeks of age and are fully weaned by seven to 10 weeks

Photos: Alamy

Adult dogs need one or two walks daily; some breeds have higher energy levels and exercise needs than others

> **“In pedigrees, gene pools have become small and inherited diseases abound”**

and the extra cleaning? Armed with your list, find a dog with the genes to suit you all.

Research the temperament traits of the breeds you find appealing. A big clue to personality is the history of the breed and the job its ancestors did. Then consider what it will be like having a dog with those traits living in your home.

YOUTH OR WISDOM?

Once you’ve settled on the type of dog you want, do you buy a puppy or find an adult from a rescue centre? A puppy is a clean slate and you’ll have the delight of watching them grow, but you will need to spend lots of time on education during the first year in order to develop a well-behaved dog. Alternatively, an adult will be past the house training and chewing phases, and what you see is what you get.

If you decide on a puppy, choose your breeder wisely as this makes a tremendous difference to the health and temperament of the dog you end up with. Not only will the breeder be responsible for the genetic make-up, but they will also be caring for the puppy for the majority of its socialisation period, a time when the puppy learns to be well-adjusted and unafraid as it discovers the world.

Finding good breeders isn’t easy, but it’s best not to visit litters unless you have done your research. It is almost impossible not to fall in love at once when you see those little balls of fluff, so it’s better to only visit puppies that you know have been raised by a conscientious and dedicated breeder. Members of The Kennel Club’s Assured Breeders scheme agree to follow good practices and are inspected every three years.

In addition, make sure the breeder you choose has had the puppy tested for any inherited diseases for that particular breed. Sadly, in producing pedigree dogs, gene pools have become small and inherited diseases abound. This has become such an issue that many owners are turning to crossbreeds, such as labradoodles or cockapoos. So find out about the diseases affecting your chosen breed and make sure you’re buying a dog that has every chance to live a long and healthy life.

Whether you get an adult or a puppy, one of the most important things to do is to educate and house-train your dog so they can be controlled outside on walks and be pleasant to live with at home. Modern methods of positive training make this a fun activity for both you and the dog, and all the family can enjoy teaching the new dog or puppy how to behave.

Finally, if going out for walks in all weathers really fills you with dread, or work and a social life keep you away from home for most of the day, it may not be a good time to get a dog. It may be better to wait until your circumstances change so you both will have a good chance of enjoying life together. **Gwen Bailey**

Dog jabs

Puppies need their first vaccinations when they’re around eight weeks old. They’ll usually receive a course of two jabs two to four weeks apart, then annual boosters are needed to maintain protection.

One cow can produce between 250 and 500 litres of methane per day

3

What is Bovaer and why is it causing a storm?

Bovaer is a chemical added to cattle feed that reduces the animals' ability to produce methane and is being trialled as a tool in the battle against climate change. Methane is a greenhouse gas, absorbing more energy than carbon dioxide, and is responsible for 30% of the rise in global temperatures, according to the International Energy Agency. With 1.5 billion cattle in the world producing over 100 million tonnes of methane annually through burping and farting (according to the US Environment Protection Agency), there's an urgency to reduce these emissions.

However, some misinformed politicians and online commentators have claimed Bovaer is dangerous to humans. Conspiracy theorists have even suggested Bovaer is being used to reduce human fertility and control the global population. There have been TikTok videos of people destroying butter and milk in protest.

Bovaer is the brand name for the chemical 3-nitrooxpropanol (3-NOP). About a quarter of a teaspoon is added to a cow's feed per day. The chemical temporarily inactivates an enzyme in the cow's rumen where it digests food, reducing methane production. So why have some people complained about Bovaer?

When advising the UK Food Standards Agency (FSA) on the application to trial Bovaer in 2022, the Animal Feed and Feed Additives Joint Expert Group (AFFAJEG) and Advisory Committee on Animal Feedingstuffs (ACAF) found that, in its pure form at the manufacturing state, the additive "should be considered corrosive to the eye, a skin irritant and potentially harmful by inhalation". However, it pointed out that Bovaer isn't harmful at the point it is fed to animals. The joint report concluded "it is not a cause for concern... the additive poses an acceptable risk to the environment... based on three long-term trials can be considered efficacious for reducing methane production in ruminants". The FSA also assessed more than 58 studies where the additive was found to be safe. It says the additive is metabolised by cows and does not pass into the milk, being broken down into compounds that are already naturally present. In short, there's no basis for the claims being bandied around on social media. However, scientists have conceded that more can be done to communicate these issues clearly.

Organic farmers point to other methods for reducing methane in cattle. Studies such as that by Dr Elizabeth Hart at Aberystwyth University reveal that grazing cows on mixed pastures of grasses, herbs and legumes provides a more digestible diet than feed or monocultures of rye grass, reducing methane emissions by 22%. **Fergus Collins**

Less gas

Adding willow, maize and seaweed, such as red algae, to cattle feed have also been shown to effectively reduce cows' methane emissions.

"Mixed pastures of grasses, herbs and legumes provide a more digestible diet for cows"

4 Do I need walking poles?

"I don't need them – they're just for old people." Sadly, that's a familiar refrain when it comes to walking poles. And although you may not strictly need a pair in order to go out on a hike, there are numerous benefits to using them, however long or short your walk, and over whatever terrain. For a start, you'll find yourself covering the ground faster, being able to walk further and feeling less fatigued when doing so. One of the reasons for this is because poles provide you with support as you walk, spreading the work to muscles in the upper part of your body, taking some of the strain off your legs. Walking poles also slightly reduce the amount of impact your body takes every time your foot hits the ground. That's something your ankles, knees and hips will thank you for especially.

Poles help straighten your posture too. This is especially true when walking uphill with a rucksack on, when hikers have a tendency to slouch, a bad habit that may lead to back problems. Furthermore, your poles offer you another two points of contact with the ground, which may help to keep you from falling over on slippery surfaces such as mud and ice, or when making your way across a stream on algae-covered stones.

Downhill support

When walking downhill, lengthen your poles by 5–10cm and place them slightly further in front of you than you would on flat ground.

The type of walking pole you choose is entirely down to whatever suits you (and your wallet) best. Here are half a dozen elements you should consider when buying your first pair:

Handle: Plastic, EVA (which feels like foam and so gives a softer grip) or cork (moderately absorbent).

Strap: The traditional loop around your wrist or a comfy glove strap.

Tip: Steel or tungsten carbide (the latter is less prone to rusting).

Packability: Some poles are foldable while others pack down like telescopes.

Weight: Most standard poles are made of aluminium but ultralight carbon-fibre models are available, becoming increasingly expensive the lighter they get.

Size: Poles come in many different lengths so make sure you buy a pair that's suitable for your frame. Staff in your local outdoors shop should be able to advise you on this.

Once you own some poles, it's a good idea to learn how to use them effectively and efficiently. There are simple techniques for trekking uphill, downhill and on the level, and plenty of video advice on all three online.

And you never know when a pair might come in handy. Hiking the Tour de Mont Blanc a few years ago, I slipped while traversing a precipitous icy slope and had I not been able to jam a pole into the snow before I'd slid too far I'd have gone plummeting down the mountainside. **Dixe Wills**

If you do a lot of mountain walking, carbon poles with carbide tips are lightweight and have good grip on rocks and ice

Photo: Alamy

5

Can I target belly fat?

Even the most committed hiker, runner, cyclist or swimmer can possess belly fat that betrays their healthy hobby. But whether you can target specific areas for weight loss is disputed. For example, a 2013 study discovered that localised muscle-resistance training led to the whole body becoming leaner, not specifically the area of the body trained. But a small-scale 2023 Norwegian study concluded fat loss can be localised with a combination of treadmill and abdominal exercises. There's certainly a school of thought that aerobic exercise will help you lose fat everywhere, but the loss is more concentrated in the areas where the muscle is most active.

The reason we struggle to specifically banish belly fat is that this weight isn't just in one place. It's everywhere, and primarily in two forms. In most people, about 90% of body fat is subcutaneous, which lies in a layer just beneath the skin. If you poke your belly, the fat that feels soft is subcutaneous fat. The remaining 10% – visceral fat – is deeper and is found in the spaces surrounding the liver, intestines and other organs. You need some visceral fat to protect your organs. But in both cases, too much is a sign you have a calorie surplus – your exercise and movement levels aren't enough to burn up the calories you take in.

While it's clearly debatable that you can specifically drill down into your belly-fat reserves, there are proven ways to banish fat in general.

"Fat stores are energy, so at a basic level you need to tap into that fuel tank," says triathlon coach Joe Beer. "Low- to moderate-intensity exercise that you'll continue to do for months and years is best. Ignore the craze for pushing hard at something you'll stop in a few weeks. Look for social, outdoor activities or those that fit into a busy lifestyle, like a short power walk with friends or a regular morning swim. We're not talking super fit, just regularly active. You should not be breathless and gasping out of your mouth. Breathe through your nose comfortably into your belly."

Consistency is key. It's better to be active every day, or ride a bike gently for 30 minutes three or four times a week for example, than a longer session once a week. Beer suggests keeping a diary noting when you've done something active and to schedule upcoming exercise. And don't compartmentalise movement solely into exercise sessions. Make it a lifestyle change, so take the stairs instead of the elevator or walk to the shop instead of driving.

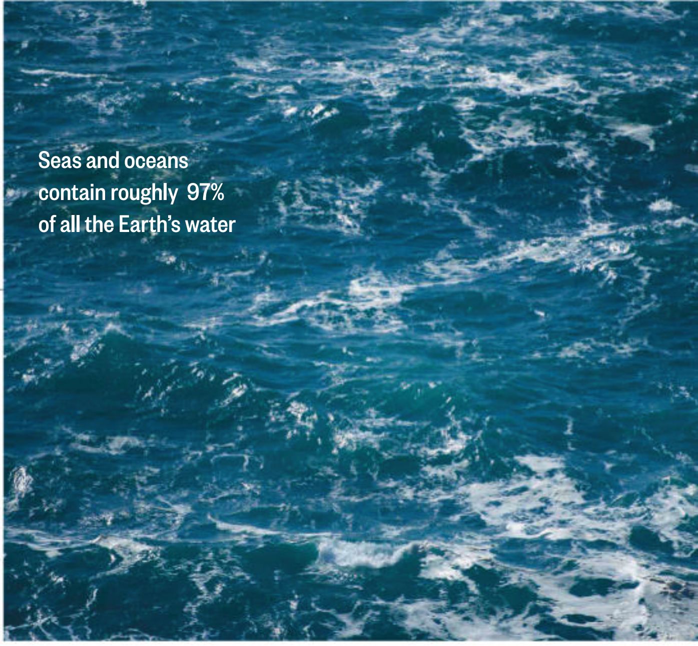
There's clearly a food element to the (belly) fat equation, too. Again, this is where patience and lifestyle changes are vital. "Losing weight isn't impossible, it's slow," Beer says. "Any big and sudden drops of weight generally show water losses. That's often down to reducing refined carbohydrates in the diet and when a person cuts out alcohol. Those things start the process, but fat loss is a long-term reduction of sugary and over-processed foods."

Everyone has 24 hours in their day. The key is to use more of those minutes or hours moving and do less sitting, or snacking through boredom. As Beer says, "We are the products of our habits. Everyone has some activity that they enjoy. Use that to enjoy the massive health benefits that come alongside weight loss." **James Witts**

Photos **Alamy**

Joining a local walking group is a great way to enjoy regular exercise and be sociable, too

6 When does a sea become an ocean?



Seas and oceans contain roughly 97% of all the Earth's water

A vast body of water can often be referred to as a sea or an ocean – the terms are often used interchangeably – but there is a crucial difference between the two, to do with their size and geographical features.

Oceans are the largest bodies of water on Earth, covering about 70% of the planet. Seas are smaller than oceans and are usually located where the ocean meets the land. They are found at the margins of the ocean, where oceans become partially enclosed by land.

Yet there is an exception to this rule. The Sargasso Sea doesn't have a land border but is referred to as a sea. This is because it is surrounded and bound by four ocean currents, which form a gyre (vortex) around it.

Then you have inland seas. An inland sea is surrounded by dry land or linked to an ocean via a river, strait, or an 'arm of the sea'; these include the Black Sea, the Marmara Sea in Turkey and the Baltic Sea which is an arm of the Atlantic. **Freya Parr**

More than seven seas

The world has around 76 seas, including Baffin Bay and the Gulf of California.

7 Have great white sharks been seen in UK waters?

Great whites grow to between five and six metres in length

Fifty years ago, Peter Benchley wrote a book that, with its subsequent Stephen Spielberg film, would make millions of people think twice about "going in the water again". *Jaws* was a brilliant shark horror story but, as its author later regretted, led to the increased demonisation of sharks, especially the species in the title role: the great white. In reality, shark attacks on humans are rare, with between 60 and 70 unprovoked attacks each year globally.

Every summer there are scare stories about great whites appearing in British territorial waters (which are from the normal tidal limit to 12 miles offshore). Despite many reported sightings, especially by fishermen, none have been verified. That said, shark expert Richard Pierce has investigated 100 such claims and found 12 to be credible. Pierce's Shark Trust says the nearest confirmed great white was caught in the Bay of Biscay some 168 miles off Land's End in 1977.

Yet UK waters could be good for great whites; the species is common in similar latitudes in the southern hemisphere. Plus, the UK is home to plentiful prey in the form of tens of thousands of harbour porpoises and seals. As sea temperatures rise, changing the distribution of prey species, many biologists believe it likely these predators will swim into British waters soon. **Fergus Collins**

Just one more bite

The world's largest predatory fish, the great white has 300 teeth. It rips prey into pieces which it swallows whole.

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DEFY ageing

Growing older brings changes in the way your body works, some of which can reduce your quality of life. We have strategies to help you stay healthier for longer

Words: **James Witts**

James Witts is a freelance writer and author specialising in endurance sports, sports science and nutrition.

1

Boost testosterone

The hormone testosterone, produced in the testicles and, to a much lesser degree, the ovaries, is vital for preserving and increasing lean muscle mass. Unfortunately, it plummets by 1% each year from the age of 30. But a 2024 study shows that lifting weights stimulates testosterone release, leading to not only a stronger you but one that'll live longer. Factor in 30-minute strength training sessions two or three times a week to gain the benefits.

2

Build muscle

Getting enough protein in your diet is essential to maximise those muscle-mass gains. This is even more important as the years roll by because your body becomes less efficient at absorbing and assimilating this vital macronutrient. Studies suggest eating a minimum of 1g of protein per kilo of body weight per day is a good starting point, from sources such as chicken, nuts, tofu, tuna and Greek yoghurt. Straight after completing a strength session, eat around 20g of protein (for example, 100g of salmon, three eggs or 180g of cottage cheese) within an hour – this is when the body is primed to channel these muscle-building amino acids into your cells.

3

Strengthen bones

"Women going through the menopause should consume plenty of dairy," says Jo Lewis, who coaches triathletes over 50. This helps to avoid the onset of osteoporosis, which can be stimulated by menopausal hormone changes. A calcium-rich diet is also crucial for osteoporosis prevention. Sufficient vitamin D is needed for calcium absorption too; take a supplement in winter when sunlight is in short supply.

4

Prevent falls

The NHS says around one in three adults over 65 and half of people over 80 will suffer at least one fall a year. One reason why is that proprioception – your body's ability to sense its place in space – decreases as you age. That, says founder of Wild Running Ceri Rees, can be ameliorated by hiking and off-road running. "When you move on rough terrain, you're engaging stabilising and synergetic muscles, not just the main muscles like you would on pavement," Rees says. "Every footfall is different, improving your proprioception."

5

Healthy glow

As the years go by, a natural loss of elastic fibres (elastin) and collagen make the skin look older. But a 2024 review into skin function suggests exercise can help. "Regular exercise is associated with increased blood flow to the skin, elevated skin temperature and improved skin moisture," reads the study. It also says exercise has a rejuvenating effect on skin, possibly due to the affect on hormone secretion.

Photos: Alamy, Getty

6

Cardio focus

“Over time, your heart becomes stiffer and smaller,” says cardiologist André La Gerche. This increases your chances of heart disease and a stroke. “But research shows that cardiovascular exercise can not only slow down this process but reverse it.” The NHS advises that you should tick off 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity each week. That’s where you break a sweat but can still hold a conversation.

7

Sleep your way to fitness

Insomnia strikes all ages but it’s particularly common in older people says the US National Institute on Aging. One reason is that circadian rhythms change over time, often leading to disturbed sleep patterns that lower your immune system and raise your chances of falling sick. So good sleep hygiene is a must. That means banishing smartphones from the bedroom, no afternoon caffeine and reducing alcohol intake. Getting out for a daily walk is also one of the best sleep medicines.

8

Fierce fat-burner

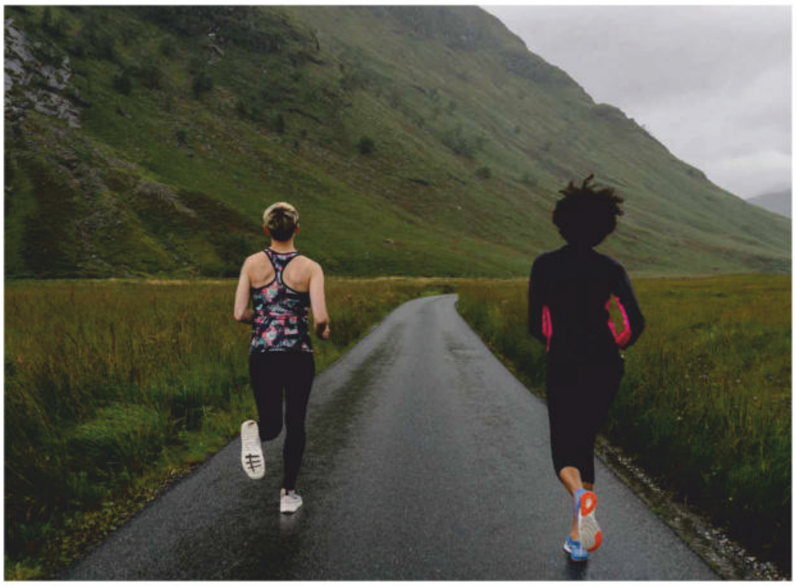
Human growth hormone (hGH) helps your body burn fat and boosts muscle growth, but like testosterone it drops as you age. That’s another reason why you should strength train, ensuring you sip water before and after your workout, as dehydration impairs how hGH responds to exercise. Also, up your arginine intake. Daily consumption of around 15–20mg of this amino acid has been shown to elevate nocturnal hGH production by nearly 60%. Arginine can be found in red meat, nuts, chicken, brown rice, soybeans and seeds.

9 Flexibility equals longevity

Over time, muscles lose their elasticity and connective tissues become less pliable. From the age of 50 onwards, this can make it more difficult to move around and maintain a healthy lifestyle. "That's where flexibility, mobility and balance work comes in," says Jo Lewis. "A twice-weekly Pilates or yoga class really will help."

10 Brain power booster

It's not just Sudoku and the *BBC Countryfile Magazine* crossword that keeps your brain ticking over – exercise does too. A 2022 study recruited 73 subjects between 60 and 80 to undertake 12 months of aerobic exercise. Along with improvements in heart health, the researchers found that their cognitive function, including memory, improved as well, an effect credited to improved cerebral bloodflow. CF



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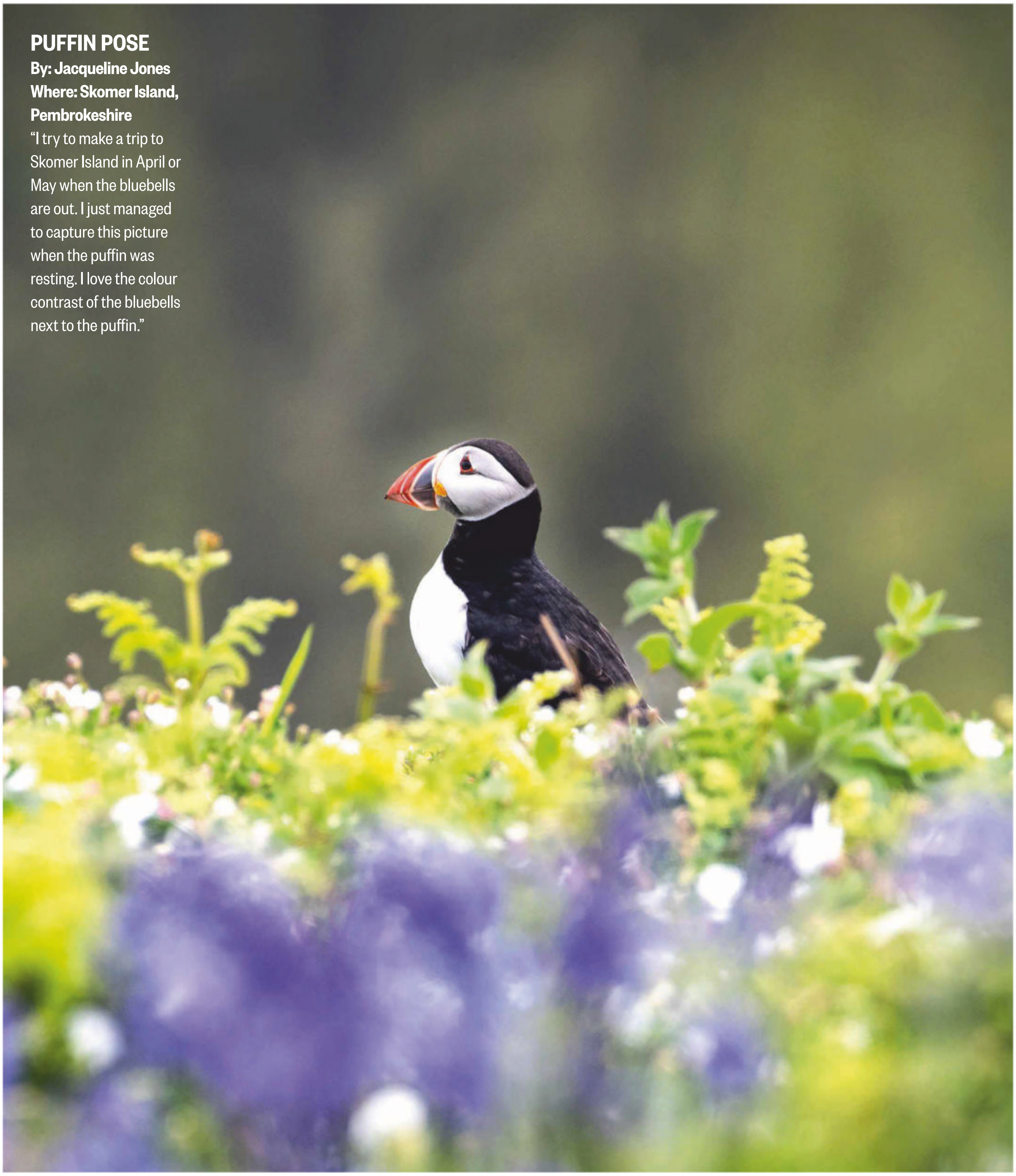
Look to get enough protein in your diet (around 1g per kilo of body weight per day) but if you're very active, a post-exercise protein drink like this can aid muscle recovery.

Photos: Alamy, Getty

YOUR PHOTOS

Share your best photographs of the British countryside with us and you could see your image published in print or online.
Email your images to **photos@countryfile.com**



PUFFIN POSE
By: Jacqueline Jones
Where: Skomer Island, Pembrokeshire
"I try to make a trip to Skomer Island in April or May when the bluebells are out. I just managed to capture this picture when the puffin was resting. I love the colour contrast of the bluebells next to the puffin."

SNACK TIME

By: Paul Woods

Where: Barnwell Country Park, Northamptonshire

"I took this on a lovely sunny day in spring from one of the bird hides in the country park; it just goes to show that patience really does sometimes pay off."

SUNSET HUES

By: Julie Taylor

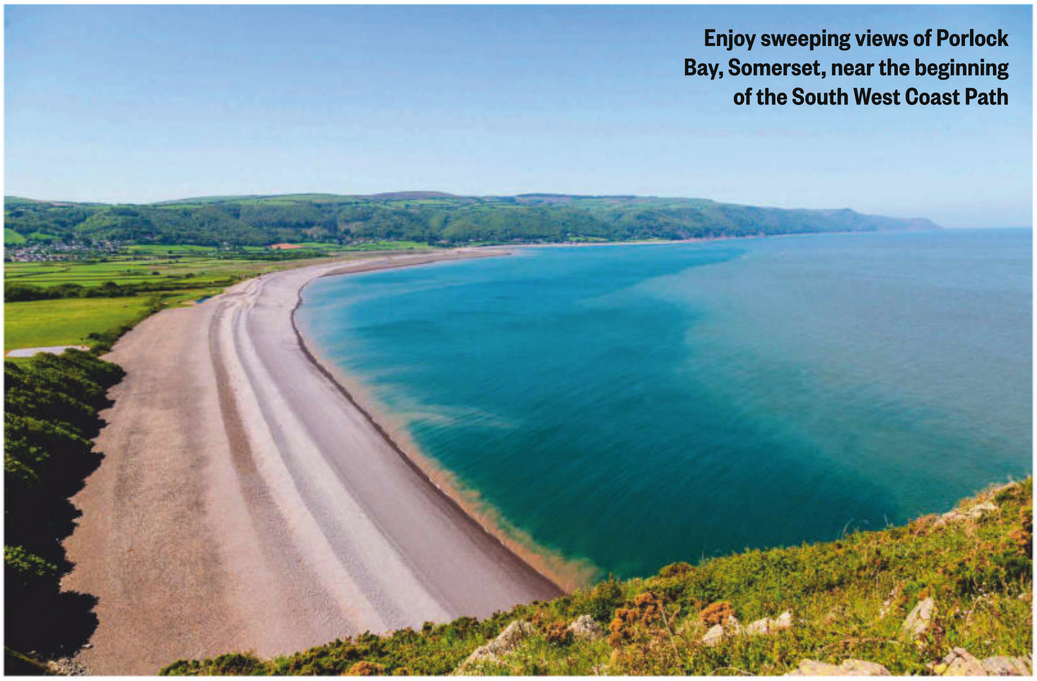
Where: Towan Headland, Newquay, Cornwall

"During a stunning evening dog walk on Towan Headland I stopped to capture the gorgeous colours of the sea pinks lit by the golden glow of the setting sun."

Country puzzles

COUNTRYSIDE QUIZ

Answers at the bottom of page 96



Enjoy sweeping views of Porlock Bay, Somerset, near the beginning of the South West Coast Path

1. When was the final section of the South West Coast Path opened?
☐ a. 1973
☐ b. 1976
☐ c. 1978
☐ d. 1989

2. What is celebrated in Wales on 'Calan Haf'?
☐ a. St David's Day
☐ b. The first day of summer (1 May)
☐ c. The Prince of Wales' birthday
☐ d. Summer solstice

3. Which vegetable, harvested in May, is famously grown in Hampshire?
☐ a. Watercress
☐ b. Broccoli
☐ c. Spinach
☐ d. Peas

4. Which Cornish settlement is famous for its May Day hobby horse parade?
☐ a. Bude
☐ b. Mevagissey
☐ c. Mousehole
☐ d. Padstow

5. What part of a Morris dancer's costume was thought to ward off evil spirits?
☐ a. Tatty coats
☐ b. Bells
☐ c. Long socks
☐ d. Braces

6. What does the Garland King celebration – held on 29 May in Castleton in Derbyshire – commemorate?
☐ a. Charles II's escape from the Parliamentarians
☐ b. Granting of grazing rights
☐ c. A 16th-century royal visit
☐ d. Charles I's beheading

7. When was Dartmoor designated as a national park?
☐ a. 1949
☐ b. 1951
☐ c. 1968
☐ d. 1987

8. Which was the last castle to be built in England?
☐ a. Warwick Castle
☐ b. Pendennis Castle
☐ c. Lancaster Castle
☐ d. Castle Drogo

9. Who wrote 'Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May'?
☐ a. William Wordsworth
☐ b. Percy Bysshe Shelley
☐ c. William Shakespeare
☐ d. John Keats

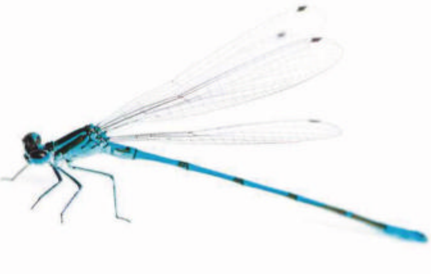
10. Which Worcestershire village has a permanent maypole?
☐ a. Offenham
☐ b. Badsey
☐ c. Honeybourne
☐ d. Charlton

11. Where do English nightingales overwinter?
☐ a. Mauritania
☐ b. Mali and Niger
☐ c. The Sahara
☐ d. The Gambia

12. Which is the closest train station to John O' Groats?
☐ a. Thurso
☐ b. Wick
☐ c. Halkirk
☐ d. Lybster

13. What is The Chorleywood Process?
☐ a. An industrial way to make bread
☐ b. Sheep-shearing method
☐ c. Yoghurt-making process
☐ d. Tree-coppicing system

14. Which male damselfly is pictured below?
☐ a. Banded demoiselle
☐ b. Common blue damselfly
☐ c. Blue-tailed damselfly
☐ d. Azure damselfly



Photos: Alamy

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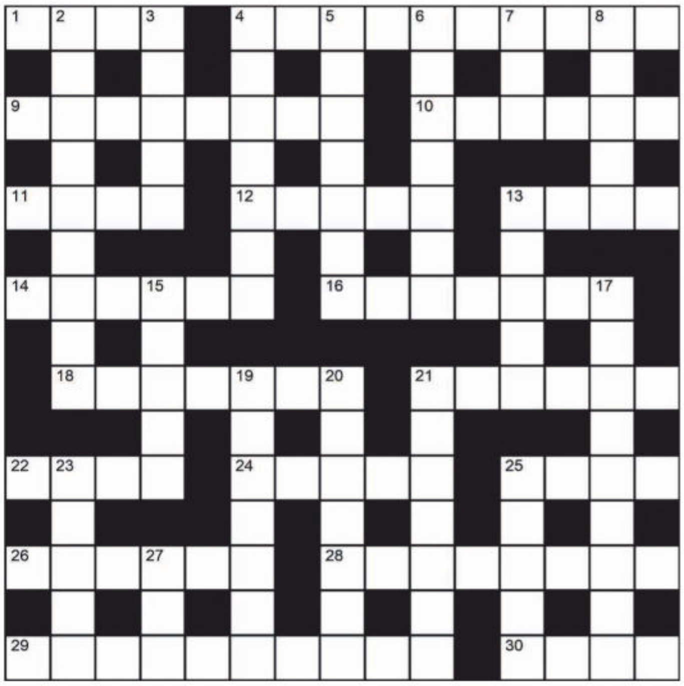
COUNTRYSIDE CROSSWORD

by Eddie James



ACROSS

1 It's a growing concern in the countryside! (4)
4 Cumbrian valley with a large temperate rainforest – lower, broad, wild (10)
9 Bitter sort of snare to catch slugs? (4, 4)
10 Stone fruit, could precede brandy or tomato (6)
11 Tavistock is named after this river (4)
12 Spruce tree species – maybe ask about it (5)
13 Water bird e.g. Bewick's (4)
14 Like a fresh, light wind (6)
16 Clam-like shellfish that bores into rock – pick odd sort (7)
18 Swellings on e.g. legume roots – on dulse, perhaps (7)
21 E.g. Red poll and White park (6)
22 Look closely, it's said, for a type of jetty (4)
24 State of soil ideal for seedlings – Tom is mixing (5)
25 Alcoholic honey drink (4)
26 Land with a large house… and large car (6)
28 Working hard and propagating? (8)
29 Powerful draught equine like Suffolk Punch (5, 5)
30 Meat substitute – from, initially, seeds of young artichokes (4)

DOWN

2 Ceredigion town on Wales Coast Path – near a bore, oddly (9)
3 Type of eel… associated with a Scottish Firth? (5)
4 Island off the Llŷn Peninsula – unusual red bays (7)
5 Hi-tech fabric that prevents tears (7)
6 Group of fruit trees – alternative to beet? (7)
7 Female of e.g. muntjac (3)
8 That of a cranefly is a leatherjacket (5)
13 Weasel relative with white winter fur (5)
15 Sea duck whose down is used in bedding (5)
17 ____ National Park / Biosphere reserve in Co. Kerry (9)
19 London borough… disturbed the balm! (7)
20 Nettle, wasp and cocktail! (7)
21 Rural dwelling – associated with pie and loaf (7)
23 An edition of *BBC Countryfile Magazine*, say (5)
25 Nocturnal pollinators (5)
27 In short, an off-road vehicle… initially approaches Thames Valley (3)

CROSSWORD SOLUTIONS

MARCH

ACROSS: 1 Wells **4** Soldier **8** Biennial **9** Nature **10** Bevy **12** Sark **13/11** Castle Drogo **15** Handicap **17** Skewbald **20** Setter **21** Spar **23** Grind **24** Lonk **25** Gobble **27** Dovecote **28** Glossop **29** Dalby

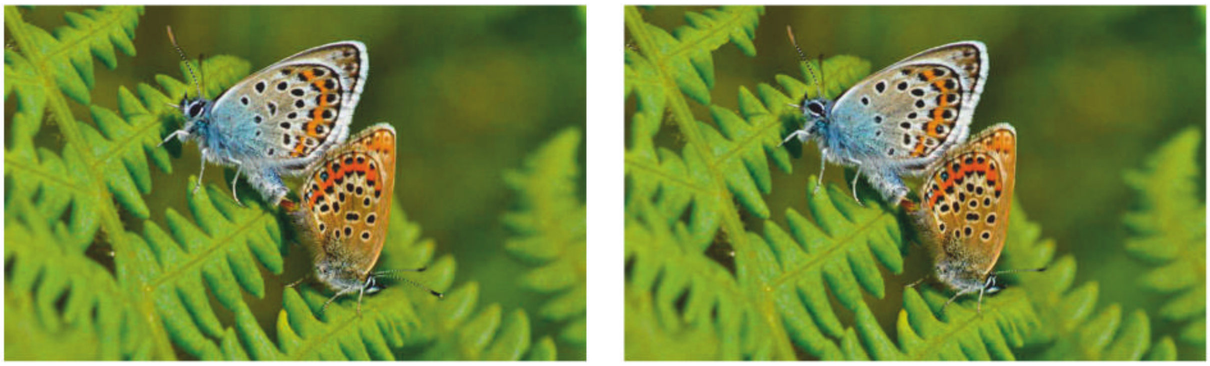
DOWN: 1 White Park **2** Lundy **3** Spindle **4** Silloth **5** Lincoln **6** Irt **7** Rarer **12** Swift **14** Tower **16** Abernethy **18** Anglers **19** Dried up **20** St David **22** Prong **24** Local **26** BTO.

APRIL

ACROSS: 8 Earthworm **10/26** Coast to Coast **11** Crow Act **12** Terrain **13** Arden **15** Ass **16** Dutch **17** Granite **18** Crampon **20** Leeks **22** Sea **23** Fluke **24** Lurcher **29** Orton **30** Natterer's

DOWN: 1 NERC **2** Whoa **3** Boat race **4** Smiths **5** Scar **6** Basalt **7** Stonehenge **9** Rhondda **13** Algal bloom **14** Nails **16** Dwarf **18** Coal tits **19** Plumage **21** Egrets **22** Spring **25** Hand **27** Crew **28** Test.

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE



Found in heathland habitats in southern England and Wales, the silver-studded blue butterfly is very rare. The males are bluer in colour while the females are a dull brown. Can you spot the five differences between these two images? Turn to page 97 for the answers.

Photo: Alamy

Your countryside

HAVE YOUR SAY ON RURAL ISSUES

Share your views and opinions by writing to us at:
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*We reserve the right to edit correspondence

Dogs have more cannabinoid receptors in their brains than humans, making the effects of ingesting cannabis potentially more damaging

CANNABIS POISONING WARNING

With summer fast approaching, I'm keen to raise awareness about the impacts of irresponsible wild camping.

My two dogs – Caley and Josie – were the victims of cannabis toxicity poisoning after eating human faeces on a walk in Glen Rosa on the Isle of Arran. Glen Rosa is very popular with wild campers – some responsible, but many not so much.

After a glorious walk we headed home. Within an hour, Josie started showing concerning symptoms. She was struggling to walk and was afraid of every little noise or touch. I took her to the vet who spotted the signs of cannabis toxicity: low heart rate, low temperature, as well as the visible symptoms. The vet has seen this before and believed Josie had eaten human waste from someone who was using cannabis. Caley was soon displaying the same symptoms. A urine sample confirmed a clear case of cannabis poisoning.

Thankfully, I got them home the next day and within a few days I had confirmation from the vet that there was no damage to any organs, which can be a problem. More people are ingesting cannabis through gummies and other edibles; I believe this is why more dogs are being affected, as the product is still active in people's waste.

This summer, I'll be keeping them on a lead near any camping spots.

Amanda Pirie, via email

CUDDLY CAIRNS

How can you not include cairn terriers in your list of six best terriers (March issue)? They have EVERY good quality a pet should have: loving, playful, friendly, cuddly, strong and healthy with long life expectancy (16 years or so). They also don't

Photos: Alamy

ANSWERS QUIZ: **1c;** 2**b;** 3**a;** 4**d;** 5**b;** 6**a;** 7**b;** 8**d;** 9**c;** 10**a;** 11**d;** 12**b;** 13**a;** 14**d**

have a history of genetic diseases. They are smart, easily trained, fiercely loyal and fun to play with.

I 'switched' to cairns in 1979 and have had the pleasure of owning six that led long, healthy happy lives, and now two more that are a joyful three years old.

Steve Sion, via email

MORE LOCKS LEARNING

In your article 'The Forgotten Valley' (February issue) I believe you were almost correct when you stated that Foxton Locks is the longest staircase of locks in the country. The flight comprises two staircases of five locks, each separated by a short length of canal called a 'pound'.

Staircase locks are relatively rare; the other notable ones are near Watford Gap (four locks), a few miles south of Foxton, and the Bingley Five and Three Rise Locks on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal. The UK's longest staircase flight is Neptune's Staircase on the Caledonian Canal near Fort William, with eight lock chambers.

Tardebigge and Caen Hill are, I believe, the longest two flights of locks in the country but they are not staircase locks. Caen Hill does look like a staircase, but there is a pound separating each lock.

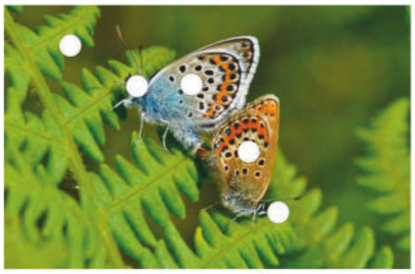
David Youngs, via email

ASTÉRIX JOY

How wonderful that you were praising Astérix in the editor's letter (March issue) – it made my day. Did you know that after René Goscinny died, Albert Uderzo carried the strip on, doing the story and illustration?

I am a member of the Cartoonist Club of Great Britain and Uderzo is held in extremely high regard – claimed by some as the best strip cartoonist ever.

Graham Robson, via email



SPOT THE DIFFERENCE ANSWERS, FROM PAGE 95 Missing frond; head is moved; mark on wing is missing; another missing mark on wing; missing antenna.

Next month
History special

Guernsey's Nazi relics; how the '40s changed farming; join the re-enactors

Meet the dedicated re-enactors as they recreate the English Civil Wars at The Commandery in Worcester

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COLUMN *Nicola Chester*

Responsible dog ownership is crucial for a healthy, harmonious countryside

Our local dog trainer, Colin Thomas, is about to retire and we are bereft. There won't be a dry eye in the arena on the farm at his last training session.

But after 30 years of puppy socialisation classes, obedience training and agility for all shapes and sizes of dog, and demonstrations at fairs and agricultural shows, few, including his wife 'Bubbles', can have earnt their retirement more. A respected countryman, Colin knows the importance of responsible dog ownership and the enjoyment of a well-behaved pet, particularly in the countryside, where there can otherwise be issues with livestock and wildlife.

We are a nation of dog lovers, and research earlier this year by the Dogs Trust and universities of Exeter and Leeds confirmed just how much: 31% of UK households own at least one dog, culminating in a canine population of around 13 million – four million more than previously estimated. There is no doubt that dogs bring many of us great joy – I've rarely been without one – but with ownership comes responsibility and the need for training. Not everyone loves dogs and even if they did, a dog in our charge shouldn't approach, jump up or chase anybody or anything. Few of us are perfect though, and if our 'recall' isn't always reliable, then our doggos must be on a lead.

Livestock worrying is a serious concern, often devastating and horrible to witness, as is the effect dogs can have in disturbing wildlife. Both these things are entirely avoidable and yet a recent report based on a popular heathland local to me recorded a shockingly irresponsible 85% of visiting dogs allowed off-lead, in defiance of seasonal signage.

Keeping your dog on a lead on walks and picking up after them prevents a range of problems

Photo: Alamy

> "DOG FAECES IN PASTURE SPREADS BACTERIA, VIRUSES AND PARASITES"

It's not just the more obvious responsibilities either: the old advice of picking up poo or 'flicking it' off paths has changed as of this year, to bag and bin it – or take it home to dispose of. Dog faeces in pasture spreads bacteria, viruses and parasites and can cause fatal diseases, such as neosporosis or sarcocystosis, in cattle and sheep. And the high nitrogen and phosphorus content of dog poo disrupts and harms ecosystems, especially when washed into the soil or bodies of water by rain.

It doesn't end there. Looking after dogs with unnecessary preventative treatments, as we are usually advised (rather than applying them only when needed) are causing great harm. Routine wormers can have a deadly effect on soil invertebrates, and flea and tick treatments, so toxic they are banned for agricultural use, remain highly poisonous in the environment. Even tiny amounts linger on a dog's coat weeks after it has been treated, washing into rivers and proving toxic to aquatic life, or remaining in shed fur, which birds use to line their nests. But dog ownership doesn't have to be a horror story. We can limit these treatments (after all, we don't continually use head lice shampoo just in case we get nits). We can avoid rivers and ponds if we have to treat our pets, and can pick up after them. I remove any ticks I find on my dog when grooming her, using a simple tick hook.

The Right to Roam movement, campaigning for Scottish-style responsible access, has worked hard on a model policy for good dog ownership, recognising that 'roaming' cannot be extended to dogs and highlighting the need to reform dog ownership at the same time. It sets out new, achievable regulations and, crucially, education and training for owners and their dogs.

Colin has enabled an incredible 1,500 dog owners to work through the Kennel Club's Good Citizen Dog Scheme with kindness and a great deal of fun and hilarity. He'll be sorely missed. CF

Have your say What do you think about the themes raised here? Write to the address on page three or email **editor@countryfile.com**

Nicola Chester is the author of Richard Jefferies Award-winning and Wainwright Prize Highly Commended book *On Gallows Down*.

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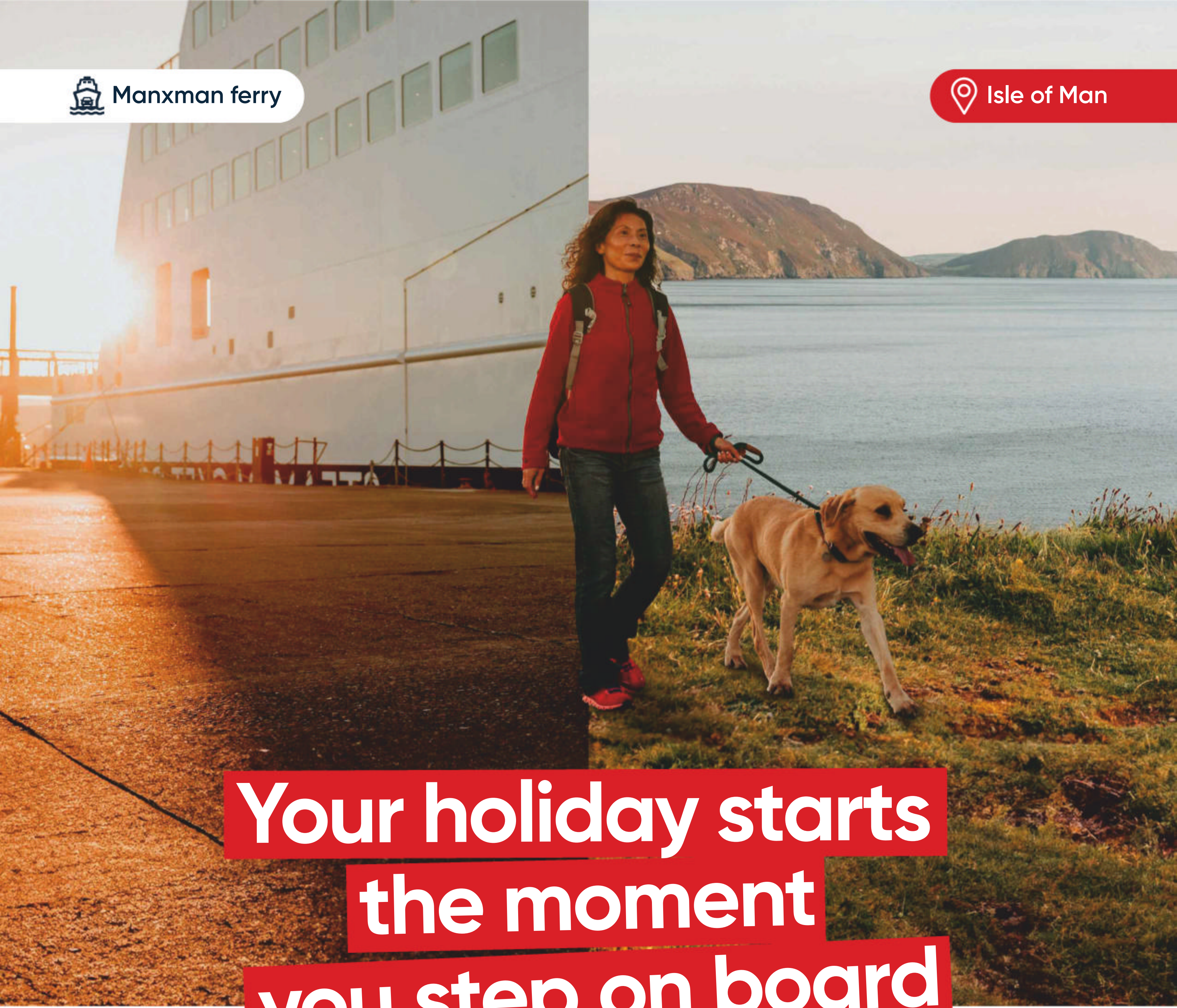

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